THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY OF GIAMBATTISTA VICO

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References, Translations and Abbreviations

The abbreviation N.S. refers to the 1744 edition of The New Science. All references to it are given in numbers which refer to the system of numbered paragraphs of the edition by F. Nicolini in Volume 43 of La Letteratura Italiana (Riccardo Ricciardi, Milan-Naples, 1953). The translations used are those by T. G. Bergin and M. H. Fisch in either their original version (Cornell University Press, New York, 1948) or the revised and abridged version (Anchor Books, New York 1961) in both of which the same system of numbered paragraphs is used. Any departures from these translations are indicated and explained in the text. All other references are given in the footnotes.

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PREFACE

The title of my thesis may lead the reader to expect to find in it rather more and different things than there actually are. Because of this I think it advisable to outline some of the restrictions which have been imposed upon it and some of the reasons which explain these.

The first and most important restriction lies in the fact that it is mainly confined to the exposition and elucidation of Vico's theories. There is little philosophical discussion of the tenability and value of his ideas and such as I have been able to include is largely to be found in the brief concluding section. I have found it necessary to omit altogether any comparisons of Vico with latter-day thinkers of his type, e.g. Hegel, Spengler and Toynbee.

A variety of reasons have contributed towards this. The first is the obscure, diffuse and often muddled nature of "The New Science", which is notoriously difficult to understand. In part this problem arises not so much from the difficulty of the ideas as from the fact that there are so many of them. But this alone would not be a reason for puzzlement. It becomes so when allied to a second factor: the difficulty of understanding the meaning of some of Vico's principal pronouncements about the nature of the enterprise carried out in "The New Science" and about the relationships between at least some of its main theories.

It is admitted on all hands that Vico's language is obscure. I should not want to dispute this and, indeed, have had to go to some lengths to try to

clear up a few of these obscurities. It is also alleged sometimes that some of the difficulties of understanding "The New Science" arise from philosophical confusions.[1] This is a much more disputable claim. It will become clear in the following work that I hold that Vico was by no means so confused in his grasp of his own doctrines as the general obscurity of "The New Science" might suggest. Certainly I do not think that he was guilty of one or two basic philosophical confusions which, if located, would provide the clue to the unravelling of most of the difficulties of his work. Nor do I think that those mistakes which he does make are so fundamental that he is left with nothing of importance to say once they have been rectified.

An alternative explanation of the difficulties one encounters in trying to find a consistent interpretation of "The New Science" is that Vico's general pronouncements about his theories are not precise enough. Their lack of precision allows of a variety of interpretations, on some of which Vico can come to appear guilty of great philosophical confusion. On the other hand when one investigates Vico's doctrines in their actual application one is able to reject most of the interpretations which leave Vico open to the charge of philosophical confusion.

In such a situation one promising approach has seemed to me to be to examine first of all Vico's theoretical account of his doctrines, trying to come to some rather general conclusions as to the possible interpretations they allow, then to decide between these and render them more precise by considering them in their actual application. The thesis therefore falls into three sections. In the first there is an examination of some of Vico's theoretical pronounce-

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[1] See Croce's "The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico" pp. 36-41.

ments, together with an attempt to elucidate some of the key terms he uses. Most of the conclusions arrived at here are highly provisional. In the second some of these doctrines are reconsidered in their practical application and an attempt is made to come to more precise conclusions concerning their nature. In the third a brief philosophical discussion is offered of a few aspects of Vico's work.

It will be seen from this that my thesis is largely exegetical. This is unfortunate in that it has necessitated the omission of any critical evaluation of many of Vico's theories. Nevertheless it has been rendered necessary by a second factor - the state of Vichian studies today. Although I have listed in the Bibliography a few books which I have consulted, there is not to be found in any of these a detailed examination of any of Vico's texts. Most of them offer very general accounts of Vico's theories and while these are often interesting the degree of textual reference offered and the lack of discussion of these references make it impossible to decide whether or not these accounts are correct. This is true even of the most ambitious of these works, that by Croce, in which the reference system only correlates the contents of each chapter in toto with selected pages from Vico. As a result I have found that my attempt to clarify even a small number of Vico's theories has involved much rather tedious textual examination; I have been able to take nothing for granted. This explains also why it is that in the actual thesis very few references are made to these other works on Vico. I have simply not found them detailed enough to be helpful in the questions which I felt had to be answered. Yet without a close textual examination of these questions I see no way in which one will ever be able to decide what Vico is saying and whether he is worth studying.

These two reasons, the obscurity of Vico's texts and the lack of a detailed

exposition of any of them, explain also why this thesis is confined to an examination of only one of Vico's works, the 1744 edition of "The New Science". I have eschewed entirely any investigation of the development of Vico's doctrines not because I think that this would not throw valuable light on the nature of his doctrines but because there exist no adequate examinations of Vico's other works; the use of any of them would therefore have required the same sort of textual examination as that I have tried to provide of "The New Science". To provide this for more than one of Vico's works would, in my view, be beyond the scope of one thesis.

In fact, even in its treatment of this one text of Vico's my account is highly selective. This selective treatment I would also justify by reference to the above two reasons. I hold myself responsible, however, for the actual selection of themes and material for discussion. It might be further helpful to explain the principles upon which I have done this.

In "The New Science" Vico tries to give some account of what he is trying to do, the problems he faces and how he hopes to deal with them. This is offered mainly in Book I, in Sections II and IV, entitled "Elements" and "Method" respectively. The Elements are divided into two sets. In one of these Vico presents principles which, he claims, underlie the whole of "The New Science". In the other he puts forward more specific principles relevant only to limited parts of the work. Though Vico failed to adhere strictly even to this simple scheme, it is nevertheless a useful division. Making the provisional assumption that Vico at least knew which were the most basic and general of his doctrines, I have chosen to deal in the first instance with those which are contained in the principles which underlie the whole of "The New Science". This explains why it is that the theories dealt with in the first part of my thesis, theories about the nature of human activity, the relation of society to individual, the

possibility of laws of historical evolution, are those covered in the first twenty-two elements.

Apart from these very general theories Vico offers a large number of rather more specific theories - theories about the nature of early language, or the nature of different kinds of thinking or different kinds of human institutions at different periods of historical evolution. These theories are often very interesting in themselves. Some of them are referred to, others outlined, in the second part of the thesis. But here no attempt at a comprehensive or continuous account of them has been attempted. In the second part, where I have tried to investigate actual applications of the most general principles, I have not hesitated to use these rather more specific principles and theories as examples of the more general in their actual application, stating only those more specific ones which, for a variety of reasons, I have found specially suitable for this purpose.

As a result a large number of highly interesting theories in "The New Science" have received little or no mention at all, while others have been described only to the degree necessary for their use as illustrations of more general theories. If at times this seems unjust to Vico I would defend my procedure by pointing out that even this one work, "The New Science", contains so many different theories that it could profitably be the subject of a large number of theses, any one of which would be unjust in exactly the same way.

PART I

CHAPTER I

The Importance of the Elements

In "The New Science" Vico tries to establish that there is a general pattern to which, under certain conditions, the histories of all nations will conform, i.e. he tries to establish the laws which govern the historical development of nations. The work itself is divided into five books. Book I is intended primarily to be an account of the general philosophical principles underlying the enterprise. Book II is an actual account of some history, mainly of Rome and to a lesser extent of Greece, given as an example of how the history of a nation should be written if it is to be seen as an instance of a general pattern. Book III, concerned with the interpretation of the Homeric poems, is an example of Vico's conception of the correct way to deal with historical evidence. Book IV is a general summary of the actual pattern which Vico claims to have established as a result of his enquiries. Book V gives some indications as to how to construe periods of history nearer to Vico's own time in conformity with the over-all programme. It also suggests how, since these are instances of the same general pattern as the histories of Book II, the different histories can throw light on one another.

Vico does not manage to adhere strictly to the intentions which underlie this scheme. Even so it is impossible to understand what he is doing, and even more what he thought he was doing, without an investigation of Book I in which

part of the philosophical account is given.

Two things stand out in Book I. The first is a section (II) consisting of one hundred and fourteen Elements which, Vico says, "course through our Science and animate it in all its reasonings about the common nature of nations".[1] Unfortunately, it is difficult not only to understand many of these elements but also to see how to take them if they are to fulfil the function here suggested by Vico.

The second feature of Book I which stands out is the great importance Vico attaches to a certain epistemological principle, the principle that what "men had made .... men could hope to know".[2] It is clear, as I shall shortly show, that Vico thinks that there is some intimate connection between this principle and at least some of the more important elements. But the nature of this connection is far from obvious.

This obscurity is something which I have not found satisfactorily explained by Vico's commentators. Their approach often is to discuss first the epistemological principle as a principle in itself and then go on to discuss the other doctrines of "The New Science" as though it is quite clear in what sense they follow from, or are connected to, the epistemological principle. But this sense is rarely explicitly discussed or brought to light and it is certainly not at all obvious.

What I wish to do ultimately is to investigate the relation between "The New Science" and Vico's epistemological principle. To do this it will be necessary to conduct an investigation into the Elements which not only, as Vico says, "animate" the reasonings of "The New Science" but also, as I

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[1] N.S. 119. [2] N.S. 331.

shall show, throw light on the meaning of Vico's epistemological principle and help to reveal in what sense it is basic to Vico's whole enterprise. Before going on to discuss some of the more important elements I should like to offer some considerations to give some initial plausibility to this approach.

It is commonly acknowledged by commentators that Vico's main epistemological principle is basic to "The New Science" and, indeed, as I mentioned above, many commentators commence with a discussion of it. Nevertheless, it is an oddity which seems to have escaped explicit mention that not only does Vico himself not begin with a statement of the principle but also that it is rarely stated in "The New Science" and that nowhere in that large work is there any full discussion of its importance. It is not, however, the case that Vico was uninterested in the principle or that he failed to realise its importance. The contrary is amply attested by the fairly full, and certainly direct, discussion he gave it in his earlier work, "De Antiquissima Italorum Sapientia". Nevertheless, the commentators who have discussed Vico's views here have not seemed to find it remarkable that, while they can do full justice to the earlier view of the principle as stated in the above work, they have considerably less direct material on which to work when it comes to discussing Vico's later view. Yet this paucity of later material should have occasioned some surprise since Vico himself expressed the wish that posterity should judge him by the contents of "The New Science" which, he held, in its second form superseded all his previous works.[1]

The paucity of later discussion of the principle might be explained by the suggestion that by the time of writing "The New Science" Vico no longer attached to the principle the importance he had earlier given it. But this

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[1] "The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico", p. 191.

suggestion can be immediately discounted since, few though the references to it are in "The New Science", in each Vico puts the matter in such a light that there can be no doubting that he himself still took it to be in some sense a very basic principle in his work.[1]

It is time to turn to Vico's first important statement of the principle in "The New Science", and it is necessary here to note the point at which it is introduced. As already mentioned "The New Science" does not begin with this principle. Instead, it starts with a section of some forty paragraphs, entitled "Idea of The Work", intended as an Introduction and taking the form of allegedly explicatory comments upon an allegorical picture in which Vico represents the main theories of "The New Science". This section is meant to be a summary of "The New Science"; but the condensation involved in this undertaking is so great that the summary can only properly be understood with the aid of an explication of the rest of "The New Science" rather than, as Vico doubtless intended, an understanding of the rest of "The New Science" being aided by the summary. For this reason I propose to devote no detailed comment to this section in itself.

Book I proper, of "The New Science", entitled "Establishment of Principles", also fails to commence with the basic epistemological principle. Instead it begins with a Chronological Table, in which Vico sets down separate chronological histories of various nations, each treated as a history in itself, most detail being given in the case of the histories of Greece and Rome with which Vico was most familiar.

Some of the datings, and, indeed, the very interpretation of the events

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[1] This is evident even from Vico's brief account of it in his Conclusion. "It is true that men have themselves made this world of nations (and we took this as the first incontestable principle of our Science ....)" N.S. 1108. Here one notes his description of it as "the first incontestable principle of our Science..."

set down in this Table are considered by Vico, justifiably, to be highly controversial. Section I of Book I which follows the Chronological Table therefore consists of a series of paragraphs explaining the reasoning behind the scheme set out in the Table. In all this, however, we are being given an example of historical argument. Nothing philosophical is introduced until we reach the concluding paragraph of the section. Here, Vico writes:

> "It can be seen by our reasoning in these Notes that all that has come down to us from the ancient gentile nations for the times covered by this Table is most uncertain ..... For this reason we trust we shall offend no man's right if we reason differently and at times in direct opposition to the opinions which have been held up to now concerning the beginnings of the humanity of the nations. By so doing we shall reduce these beginnings to scientific principles, by which the facts of certain history may be assigned their first origins, on which they rest and by which they are reconciled. For up to now they do not seem to have had any common foundation nor any continuous sequence nor any coherence among themselves."[1]

It is enough here to note Vico's claim that his reasonings will differ from those of other historians in that they will bring "scientific principles" into history (though in what capacity is obscure) and that by their aid "continuous" and "coherent" history will result.

Vico now passes on to Section II, entitled "Elements", justifying their introduction at this point in the following way:

> "In order to give form to the materials hereinbefore set in order in the Chronological Table, we now propose the following axioms, both philosophical and philological, including a few reasonable and proper postulates and some clarified definitions. And just as the blood does in animate bodies, so will these elements course through our Science and animate it in all its reasonings about the common nature of nations."[2]

The elements are set out at this point because they are to "give form" to the history which, in the Chronological Table, Vico has schematically out-

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[1] N.S. 118. [2] N.S. 119.

lined for us. Vico now sets out the one hundred and fourteen elements which comprise Section II.[1] Their statement is followed by Section III entitled "Principles" and it is not until we reach this point that the basic epistemological principle is explicitly stated.

Thus far Vico has introduced the elements which "give form" to the historical material schematically set down in the Chronological Table. He repeats this notion in the opening paragraph of Section III:

> "Now, in order to make trial whether the propositions hitherto enumerated as elements of this Science can give form to the materials prepared in the Chronological Table at the beginning, we beg the reader to consider whatever has been written concerning the principles of any subject in the whole of gentile knowledge, human and divine. Let him then see if it is inconsistent with these propositions, whether with all or some or one. For inconsistency with one would amount to inconsistency with all, since each accords with all. Certainly on making such a comparison he will perceive that it is a tissue of confused memories, of the fancies of a disordered imagination; that none of it is begotten of intelligence, which has been rendered useless by the conceits enumerated in the Axioms (125, 127). For on the one hand the conceit of the nations, each believing itself to have been the first in the world, leaves us no hope of getting the principles of our Science from the philologians. And on the other hand the conceit of the scholars, who will have it that what they know must have been eminently understood from the beginning of the world, makes us despair of getting them from the philosophers...."[2]

Clearly enough, Vico is here posing the question how he can justify the choice of elements which he has just outlined as against any other set. For, though this is not stated here, it would seem that other sets would "give form" to other chronological schemes of the sort Vico castigates and rejects as unhistorical throughout "The New Science".[3]

In the above argument Vico's reply takes the form of a challenge: that the principles of others be compared to his to see whether "they are inconsistent

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[1] N.S. 120-329. [2] N.S. 330. [3] N.S. 125, 126.

with these propositions, whether with all or some or one. For inconsistency with one would amount to inconsistency with all, since each accords with all".

Confident that no other set of principles will survive this test, Vico then proceeds to the claim that inconsistency with his own set will render any other such set unsound. Now on the face of it this procedure seems invalid, for Vico appears to be arguing that the principles of others are not acceptable if they are inconsistent with his whereas the acceptability of his own is still supposed to be in question. Vico seems to be making the mistake of arguing from the alleged self-consistency of his own set of principles to their acceptability, i.e. to be taking their self-consistency to be a sufficient condition of their acceptability rather than merely a necessary condition.

This supposition seems further strengthened by the fact that, in the paragraph quoted above[1], Vico next proceeds to give an account of the underlying reasons why other systems are liable to be disorderly, by referring to the two vices he labels "the conceit of the nations" and "the conceit of scholars". Broadly speaking, the conceit of the nations consists in the tendency of historians to be nationistically biased in their approach to their subject matter[2], while the conceit of scholars consists in the tendency of philosophers to read back into history truths known to themselves and thus to treat of earlier peoples anachronistically, as being capable of grasping these truths[3]. The upshot of these errors, Vico claims, is that we can look neither to historians nor to philosophers for "the principles of our Science".[4] But the only reason which has so far been offered why we should refuse to accept such tendencies on the part of historians and scholars is that they conflict with the recommendations of Vico's own principles. So, once again,

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[1] N.S. 330. [2] N.S. 125. [3] N.S. 127, 128. [4] N.S. 330.

Vico's procedure appears question-begging in that he seems to be assuming the acceptability of his own principles in order to reject those of others where, in fact, the acceptability of his own is still the point to be justified.

But that Vico's procedure is only apparently illegitimate comes out in his next paragraph. If we can trust neither philosophers nor historians in this matter, whom can we trust? In answer Vico brings in the first full statement of his basic epistemological principle. He writes:

> "But in the night of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity, so remote from ourselves, there shines the eternal and never-failing light of a truth beyond all question: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be rediscovered within the modifications of our own human mind. Whoever reflects on this cannot but marvel that the philosophers should have bent all their energies to the study of the world of nature, which, since God had made it, He alone knows; and that they should have neglected the study of the world of nations or civil world, which, since men had made it, men could hope to know ....."[1]

The clear implication here is that Vico's procedure is based upon "a truth beyond all question" and that an appeal to it can justify his set of principles and invalidate those of others. Unfortunately, this is all Vico says about the connection between his elements and the basic epistemological principle. Even so it is apparent that there must be some close relation between the two, otherwise acceptance of the elements would not be involved in acceptance of the epistemological principle. It is equally apparent that

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[1] N.S. 331. I have modified the translation of Bergin and Fisch in one respect here. They translate the phrase "ritruovare i principi dentro le modificazioni ...." by "its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications ...." The above translation of "ritruovare" as "rediscover" seems more accurate. The importance of this will appear in later discussions of this passage.

there cannot be the same close relation between the basic epistemological principle and the principles of other thinkers, otherwise the latter, were they internally consistent, would also be vindicated by it.

It is useless to try to be more specific about the nature of the connection involved for there are a number of ways in which one might construe this and nothing in these passages to indicate which is the correct way of doing so. It will become apparent later that there is no single way to describe the relation between the elements and the epistemological principle because the character of the different elements varies and the different kinds stand in different relationships to the principle. For example some elements give us what are really principles for historical interpretation and amongst these are those referred to as "the modifications of our human mind", in the epistemological principle. It would certainly be true here that if one accepted the basic epistemological principle and agreed to identify some of the elements with those modifications one could not refuse their claim to be legitimate principles of interpretation. Other elements, however, give an account of Vico's conception of knowledge and so explain the sense in which "men could hope to know ...." These elements offer a definition of a key concept in the epistemological principle. Obviously they also are intimately connected to it, though in a different way from the first kind of elements mentioned above, which are rather instances of one of the kinds of things referred to in it.

These suggestions would certainly comply with the claim that there is some close and important relationship between the elements and the epistemological principle and would help explain why Vico should take acceptance of the latter to justify that of the former. In the context of the structure of the initial

sections of "The New Science" as I have so far outlined them, the claim is given additional plausibility by its ability to explain the circumstances I have already mentioned, that in "The New Science" the basic epistemological principle is so rarely stated and is not, as one might expect, stated at the beginning. For if, for example, some elements were specific instances of "the modifications" referred to in the epistemological principle, one could see that though rarely stated in its most general form the latter was being given expression through the more specific propositions of the "Elements" in a way which related it to the context of actual historical investigation. Repeated statements in its most general form would be superfluous and Vico's procedure easier to understand.

These considerations suggest that it would be a mistake to begin an examination of "The New Science" with a discussion of Vico's basic epistemological principle treated independently of the Elements with which, it would seem, it is in some way intimately connected. I therefore propose to begin my own examination with a discussion of some of the principal elements in the hope that by understanding them we shall be able to throw more light on the main epistemological principle.

CHAPTER II

Vico's Division of The Elements

The elements are introduced explicitly to "give form" to the materials of the Chronological Table.[1] This suggests that their use is to be confined to the production of some scheme for the dating of events in obscure periods of history. In the next sentence, however, Vico gives us a simile which indicates that their function is far wider than this. "And just as the blood", he writes, "does in animate bodies, so will these elements course through our Science and animate it in all its reasonings about the common nature of nations." The simile is undoubtedly obscure and might stand a number of interpretations which it would be premature to discuss here. But on any interpretation one would have to acknowledge that Vico is according to the elements a basic function in the reasoning which occurs in "The New Science".

One must not be misled by this into thinking that the elements are all of one type. Vico himself makes this clear in describing them as "axioms, both philosophical, and philological, including a few reasonable and proper postulates and some clarified definitions".[1] This pronouncement distinguishes four types of elements. The exact nature of the first and, to a lesser degree, of the second of these four types is difficult to ascertain and will be discussed at much greater length as we proceed. On the other hand, the nature of the other two types is obvious and may profitably be disposed of here.

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[1] N.S. 119.

By a "definition" Vico means nothing more than his account of the meaning of some term he is using. For the most part definitions are offered of technical terms of Vico's own making. When given they are of great importance since, as we shall see, it is part of Vico's project to provide a framework for historical description and explanation which involves the use of some categories not to be found in everyday speech. As an example, one might consider Elements XI and XII. In Element XI Vico gives an account of the factors which determine "the common sense of man", a notion of great importance in his scheme. In Element XII he gives as a "definition"[1] an account of the meaning of this term.

By a postulate Vico means what we might term a particular historical hypothesis, i.e. a hypothesis concerning what happened at some point in history. Of course, most accounts of what happened in history might be called "hypotheses" on the grounds that the evidence available to a historian never entails his conclusion. But Vico reserves the term 'postulate' for accounts of what happened in those cases where there is more or less no direct evidence available to the historian, no eyewitness accounts or reliable traditional beliefs, but where there is the possibility of showing the postulate to be "reasonable" by showing that it is consistent with an overall account of the period while offering a good explanation of what would otherwise remain obscure.

As an example we may take the postulate, mentioned in Element CIII, that "on the shore of Latium some Greek colony had been set up, which after conquest and destruction by the Romans, remained buried in the darkness of antiquity".[2] Vico's reason for asserting this postulate is not that it is based on direct evidence, for there is no traditional account of the existence of such a colony,

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[1] N.S. 143. [2] N.S. 306.

but that it provides the most reasonable way of explaining a certain Greek influence in Roman traditions and literature at a time in which all the direct evidence goes to show the Romans had no intercourse with, or conscious knowledge of the existence of, the Greeks.[1]

This short discussion of the notion of a postulate is useful in that it serves to show that Vico's elements by no means have the single character his own introduction of them might suggest. For a postulate of the sort just mentioned is really a historical hypothesis. It would seem very odd to describe postulates, which all have this character,[2] as, in common with the other elements in "The New Science", helping "animate it in all its reasonings about the common nature of nations".[3] The most that can be said for such postulates is that while helping explain some obscure matter, they are not inconsistent with the rest of the history provided in "The New Science". Clearly one cannot think of them as being basic to the scheme envisaged, in the same way as the philosophical axioms.

It is therefore not the case that the various types of element function in the same way, or have the same importance in "The New Science". Hence it would not be profitable to discuss them all. Fortunately, in making a choice of elements to discuss, we are helped by the fact that Vico himself provides some rather random remarks as to how he conceived their natures. Following these remarks we can come to a rough classification of the various elements.

The first, and most coherent, set of remarks provided by Vico in this matter occur under Element XXII. Here he suggests that the first four propositions "give us the basis for refuting all opinions hitherto held about

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[1] N.S. 307. [2] For other examples see N.S. 192 and 295. [3] N.S. 119.

the beginning of humanity".[1] He next goes on to suggest that "the subsequent propositions, from the fifth to the fifteenth, which gives us the basis of truth, will serve for considering this world of nations in its eternal idea, by this property .... that 'Science has to do with what is universal and eternal'".[1] Thirdly, "the last propositions, from the fifteenth to the twenty-second, will give us the basis of certitude. By their use we shall be able to see in fact this world of nations which we have studied in idea ..."[1] Finally, he characterises "the propositions set forth above" as "general" and as "the basis of our Science throughout ..." and distinguishes them from "those which follow" which are "particular and provide more specific bases for the various matters it treats of".[2]

Adopting the scheme here suggested by Vico we may classify these propositions as follows:

General Propositions. I-XXII. These are the basis of "The New Science" throughout.

Propositions	I-IV	give the basis for the refutation of wrong opinions concerning the "antiquity" of humanity.
"	V-XV	give the basis of truth, considering the world of nations in its eternal idea.
"	XVI-XXII	give the basis of certitude, following in fact what has hitherto been seen in idea only.

The elements from XXIII to CXIV cannot be so neatly grouped. Vico, however, does make comments after most of them which suggest how he construes the function of the element, or of a group of elements, in his Science. It is worth while to classify these also according to his indications, partly because I shall want to refer to some of them and also because a summary is the most economical way of revealing their varied nature. This classification works out as follows:

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[1] N.S. 163. [2] N.S. 164.

Particular Propositions XXIII-CXIV. These give "more specific bases for the various matters treated of".[1]

Propositions	XXIII and XXIV	prove the truth of sacred (i.e. Hebrew) history against secular history and provide a basis for distinguishing between these.[2]
"	XXV	demonstrates that the flood was a world-wide event.[3]
"	XXVI and XXVII	make it evident that "the entire original human race was divided into two species: the one of giants, the other of men of normal stature", and identify the former with the gentiles and the latter with the Hebrews.[4]
"	XXVIII-XXX	"establish the fact that the world of peoples began everywhere with religion. This will be the first of the three main principles of this Science".[5]
"	XXVIII-XXXVIII	(i.e. a section including the last three propositions above) reveal "the beginnings of divine poetry or poetic theology".[6]
"	XXXI-XXXVII	give "the beginnings of idolatry".[6]
"	XXXIX	gives "the beginning of divination".[6]
"	XL	gives "the beginnings of sacrifice..."[6]
"	XLI-XLII	postulate the spreading of the original people and giants throughout the world.[7]
"	XLII-XLVI	reveal the beginnings of historical mythology.[8]
"	XLVII-LXII	(plus I-XXII) cover the divisions of poetic theory. Of these, propositions XLVII-XLIX explain the origin of poetic characters[9] and propositions LVI-LXII establish that verse speech preceded prose speech.[10]
"	LXIII	states an important etymological principle.[11]
"	LXIV	states an important relation between "the order of ideas and the order of things".[12]

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[1] N.S. 164. [2] N.S. 166 and 168. [3] N.S. 169. [4] N.S. 172. [5] N.S. 176. [6] N.S. 191.
[7] N.S. 195. [8] N.S. 203. [9] N.S. 209. [10] N.S. 235. [11] N.S. 237. [12] N.S. 238

Propositions	LXV-XCVI	Present "the principles of the ideal eternal history".[1]
"	XCVII-XCIX	show that inland nations were founded before maritime nations.[2]
"	C-CII	give principles for the etymology of foreign words, differing from that of native words.[3]
"	CIII	states a postulate necessary for Roman history.[4]
"	CIV	presents an axiom to decide whether man is "naturally sociable".[5]
"	CV	presents an axiom to prove "that providence ... is the ordainer of the natural law of nations".[6]
"	CVI	presents an axiom "which might have been laid down among the general axioms ..."[7]
"	CVI-CVIII	present axioms which criticise the systems of "Grotius, Selden and Pufendorf".[8]
"	CIX-CXI	give the principles of "strict law".[9]
"	CXII	gives the principle of human law.
"	CXI and CXIII	are particular applications of the general propositions IX and X to the question of the natural law of nations.[10]
"	CXII-CXIV	give the principles of "mild law".[11]
"	CIX-CXIV	establish the fact that "the natural law of nations was ordained by providence".[12]

It is obvious from the above classification of elements that these "particular propositions" cannot be so neatly grouped as the more general, and that in many ways they represent a very mixed bag. Proposition CVI, for example, is explicitly stated by Vico to be a "general proposition" and so, from that point of view, is more properly thought of along with the first twenty-two. On the other hand, propositions CXI and CXIII are "more detailed applications" of the general propositions IX and X while the same might be said of the whole

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[1] N.S. 294. [2] N.S. 298. [3] N.S. 304. [4] N.S. 307. [5] N.S. 309. [6] N.S. 312.
[7] N.S. 315. [8] N.S. 318. [9] N.S. 322. [10] N.S. 325. [11] N.S. 327. [12] N.S. 328.

body of propositions from LXV to XCVII. For these present the principles of the ideal eternal history as, in a sense, it is claimed, is also done by the general propositions V to XV, which "will serve for considering this world of nations in its eternal idea",[1] and the other general propositions XVI to XXII, by the use of which "we shall be able to see in fact this world of nations which we have studied in idea ..."[1] Yet others among them present, as we have seen, particular historical hypotheses.

In view of the mixed nature of the second set of elements, it will not, for my purpose, be profitable to make detailed comments on them all as, I think, it will be in the case of the first twenty-two. With regard to the later propositions I shall be more selective, discussing them only where I think this will throw more light on the general ones which look, prima facie, to be the only ones which could accurately be described as coursing "through our Science" and being able to "animate it in all its reasonings about the common nature of nations".

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[1] N.S. 163.

CHAPTER III

The Historical Problem

In Vico's classification it is suggested that the first four elements form a group which "give us the basis for refuting all opinions hitherto held about the beginnings of humanity".[1] But "the refutations" themselves "turn upon the improbabilities, absurdities, contradictions and impossibilities of these opinions".[1] This distinction between "the basis" of refutation, provided by the elements, and what the refutations themselves "turn upon", suggests that the elements themselves do not normally give us critical criteria, i.e. an account of those conditions to which history must conform, and the defects from which it must be free, if it is to be acceptable. The latter are described by the notions of "improbabilities, absurdities, contradictions and impossibilities" and Vico seems to assume that one knows how to handle these concepts, for they are given no explication in the Elements nor, indeed, in "The New Science" as a whole.

What the first four elements do, instead, is provide an explanation how history comes to be liable to be erroneous, that is liable to include "improbabilities, absurdities, contradictions and impossibilities". This can best be seen if we turn to these first elements themselves.

Element I states: "Because of the indefinite nature of the human mind, wherever it is lost in ignorance, man makes himself the measure of all things."[2]

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[1] N.S. 163. [2] N.S. 120.

In the corollary to this, Vico asserts that this axiom "explains" how it is that rumour becomes increasingly erroneous the further removed it is, in time and place, from those events it purports to relate.[1] Traditional accounts of the history of former epochs are therefore liable to be erroneous. In effect, Vico is stating a claim which would justify the adoption of a critical attitude towards the traditional sources of historical knowledge.

Element II, having something of the same character, states: "It is another property of the human mind that whenever men can form no idea of distant and unknown things, they judge them by what is familiar and at hand".[2] The effect of this axiom, Vico goes on, is to point "to the inexhaustible source of all errors about the beginnings of humanity that have been adopted by entire nations and by all the scholars. For when the former began to take notice of them and the latter to investigate them, it was on the basis of their own enlightened, cultivated and magnificent times that they judged the origins of humanity, which must nevertheless by the nature of things have been small, crude and quite obscure".[3]

Here Vico is bringing in another property of the human mind to explain historical errors, this property being the tendency to form judgments about the historically obscure on the principle that the obscure will resemble what is not obscure, that is, by analogy with what is familiar. As a result of this, two types of error creep in: the conceit of nations and the conceit of scholars. These are so important that Vico explicates them as separate elements.

Element III describes the conceit of the nations as the belief that "it before all other nations invented the comforts of human life and that its remembered history goes back to the very beginning of the world".[4] In effect,

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[1] N.S. 121. [2] N.S. 122. [3] N.S. 123. [4] N.S. 125.

this conceit consists in a tendency on the part of the historian to assume for his own country a privileged place in certain historical fields.

Element IV describes the conceit of scholars who, as Vico puts it, "will have it that whatever they know is as old as the world".[1] The effect of this axiom is to dispose "of all the opinions of the scholars concerning the matchless wisdom of the ancients ..... It further condemns as impertinent all the mystic meanings with which the Egyptian hieroglyphs are endowed by the scholars, and the philosophical allegories which they have read into the Greek fables".[2]

These are the four elements in which Vico most explicitly outlines the basis of his criticism of the work of other historians. They are of much greater importance than at first sight might appear. But before discussing this it would be well to note briefly a few of the applications Vico gave these principles.

In general Vico utilises the conceit of the nations as a source of error far less than the conceit of scholars. The former is mainly used in "The New Science" to explain examples of faulty chronology. Thus Vico uses it to explain the allegedly false belief held by the Egyptians that theirs was the most ancient civilisation[3] and, again, to explain a similar false belief held about themselves by the Chaldeans.[4] Nevertheless, it would seem odd, today, to allege that this principle was one of the two great sources of historical error, for historians now have methods available to them which should enable them to be completely free from this type of error. To appreciate Vico's concern here one must remember that he was writing at a time when the main way of arriving at a correct chronology was by means of an interpretation of

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[1] N.S. 127. [2] N.S. 128. [3] N.S. 47. [4] N.S. 49.

the traditional accounts of each nation as found embodied in its literature. But while the possibility of spotting internal inconsistencies allowed the critical construction of a chronological table for each nation, according to which the temporal position of its events relative to one another could be assigned with reasonable accuracy, it provided no sound criteria by which to arrive at a scale according to which the events of all nations could be assigned positions relative to one another. Today, on the other hand, historians have been able to arrive at something more like a scientific chronology through their study of evidence other than literary remains and through the ability of the physical sciences to help in establishing with accuracy the dating of these. Thus it is now possible to establish accurate chronological tables through the use of evidence and methods free from the type of error mentioned by Vico.

In view of this one must treat Vico's insistence on the conceit of nations as a prime source of historical error, as being of relevance to his own, and not to this, age. His attachment of importance to it can be justified on the ground that he, himself, was primarily concerned with the history of very obscure periods for which not even sound chronology existed, but not on the ground, which he seems to imply, that it must always be a source of difficulty for historians.

But we must also point out here that Vico's insistence on the conceit of nations as an important source of historical error may well have to be construed as a mark of his inability to be clear about the full import of his own doctrines. For, as we shall see, Vico tries to produce and justify a form of history in which what really counts is the position of events relative to one another on a scale whose units are to be defined in terms of phases of

historical development within a nation, rather than by any mathematical unit. In view of this Vico's interest in the question which nation had the oldest history, to which the conceit of nations is primarily relevant, is difficult to explain and impossible to justify. It can be explained, perhaps, simply by pointing out that it was very much a controversy at the time, but it cannot be justified since Vico's principal doctrines, if accepted, render it a question of no importance.

When we turn to references to the conceit of scholars the list is very long indeed. A small selection of examples must suffice to illustrate it. Vico alleges that this conceit is the source of the theory that certain esoteric wisdom has been handed down through a succession of different masters to become the property of different races[1]; he claims that it explains how the Greeks read their own philosophical theories back into their fables and so were led to misconceive the intellectual abilities of their ancestors, the origins of their poetry and, indeed, their entire history.[2] This, of course, is an example drawn from a type of history particularly liable to be affected by this error, the history of ideas. Vico shows many times how the history of ideas has been hindered by this notion that a certain set of esoteric and philosophical truths has been in man's possession since earliest times.

However, the principle is used more widely than this. For example, it has led to misreadings in etymology with a subsequent misunderstanding of social and political history. Anachronistic interpretations of the words "people" "king" and "liberty", to take only three, have led to a misunderstanding of the nature of the early Roman state,[3] and to the reading back into it of the class structure, and constitutional and civil developments, appropriate to a later age.[4]

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[1] N.S. 59. [2] N.S. 384, 416 and 426. [3] N.S. 663. [4] N.S. 666.

In general we can conclude that the examples given in the Elements by no means reveal the full range of instances to which this rule is to be applied. It is clear that Vico took this mistake to be behind a wide variety of examples of false readings in history.

We must note that it is implicit in Vico's claim that these types of error follow not from any one man's prejudice, not from any individual idiosyncrasy, but from natural tendencies, or properties of the mind, to which we are all prone. For this is what is implied by deriving the two conceits from the second axiom. The latter claims that it is a "property of the human mind" that men judge of the unfamiliar by analogy with the familiar.[1] How Vico construes "a property" is by no means clear here but at the very least it must be something which all men in fact, if not necessarily, possess. This is confirmed by the fact that Vico immediately goes on to claim that this axiom is "the inexhaustible source" of error as regards early history.[2] It seems clear that nobody so far has been free from this erroneous tendency. If this is so we can also conclude, since they are derived from this axiom,[3] that the two conceits indicate tendencies to which all people, and therefore historians too, are naturally prone.

If we recall the conclusion derived from the first axiom, that no traditional historical account is per se trustworthy, and add to this the new conclusion that the work of no historian is per se trustworthy, then what this represents is something very much like Descartes' sceptical stand with regard to sense knowledge, now applied to the field of historical knowledge. Vico is adducing general reasons why we can trust neither the accounts embodied in

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[1] N.S. 122. [2] N.S. 123.

[3] Vico's actual claim is that "under this head" (i.e. of the second axiom) "are to be recalled the two types of conceit ..." (N.S. 124). It is clear from this wording that he conceives of the two conceits as more specific consequences of the general tendency described in the second axiom.

the historical sources themselves, nor the interpretation of these by later historians, in our search for the truth about the past.

That this is the import of what he is saying can be confirmed by turning to the passage, already discussed, in Section III on Principles, in which Vico mentions these two conceits. Talking of the work of other historians, he there says that "none of it is begotten by intelligence, which has been rendered useless by the two conceits enumerated in the Axioms (125,127). For on the one hand the conceit of the nations, each believing itself to have been the first in the world, leaves us no hope of getting our Science from the philologians. And on the other hand the conceit of the scholars, who will have it that what they know must have been eminently understood from the beginning of the world, makes us despair of getting them from the philosophers. So, for the purposes of this enquiry, we must reckon as if there were no books in the world".[1] And just as Descartes, having produced arguments which purported to show that no claim to knowledge was ipso facto trustworthy, argued that what is required is that such claims be derived from something which "cannot be false",[2] in the argument of paragraphs 330 and 331 Vico claims that historical knowledge must be based on a "truth beyond all question".

In the light of this we are justified in asserting that the first four elements are intended to advance reasons why we should not repose trust uncritically in historical accounts, either as they exist in the originals or as worked over by later historians. To support this generalised conclusion too much must not be put upon the fact that Vico only explicitly discusses two types of error.[3] For, if we accept that by reference to these two types of error

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[1] N.S. 330. [2] The Second Meditation.

[3] This is to be explained by the fact that he seemed to find these particular faults the most common in the works of the other historians with whom he was concerned.

Vico is trying to put over the general philosophical point that it is of the very essence of historical reasoning that the acceptability of its conclusions depends not only upon their conforming to certain criteria but also upon these criteria being shown to be adequate for, and suitable to, the question in hand, we must also accept that, even where a historian could show that he was free from the two specific types of error described by Vico, he would not thereby have shown his work to be acceptable; any alternative criteria might equally not be acceptable.

Having said this, however, one must admit that it is still difficult to be clear about the exact nature of the arguments adduced by Vico. This has already been suggested when the doubt over the meaning of the word "property" in the first two axioms was mentioned. If we take "property" to mean "necessary property" then Vico would seem to be saying that it is necessarily the case that the human mind works in these historically offensive ways. But he could hardly mean this, since if it were necessarily the case that the human mind worked in such a way as to make historical errors, then there would be no possibility of eradicating this error. Therefore Vico's solution, whatever it is, would itself be ruled out.

We must therefore look for a weaker reading of "property". One which would have the requisite logical force would be that of a "tendency". For what Vico would then be suggesting would be that we are all naturally prone to reason in ways not acceptable as a basis for history. The cure, as we have seen, will lie in recourse to some self-evident epistemological principle on which a particular kind of historical reasoning can be based and by reference to which it can be justified. Put this way, the contrast between acceptable and unacceptable types of reasoning will be that between one's ability or inability to justify one's criteria by reference to such a basic principle.

If we adopt this reading we may say that Vico's first four axioms argue that the natural, unreflective ways in which people tend to think are not adequate as a basis for history. Such reasonings must be reflectively or consciously derived from a principle "which is beyond all doubt". Lacking this, no history is to be trusted.

It remains here only to point out that what I have said concerning the first two elements, which are clearly on a different logical level from the next two, is an account of only one half of their usage in Vico's hands. The completion of the account will best be left until those matters are reached in which the rest of their character is revealed.[1]

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[1] See Chapter XVII below, in which it is shown that Elements I and II are also instances of "the modifications" mentioned in Vico's basic epistemological principle as being necessary for the recovery of the principles of "the world of civil society".

CHAPTER IV

Providence, The Individual And Society

In the first four elements Vico has posed the historical problem. In the next eleven general propositions he proceeds to state those principles which, as he most obscurely puts it, "give us the basis of truth" and "will serve for considering this world of nations in its eternal idea by that property of every science, noted by Aristotle, that 'science has to do with what is universal and eternal'".[1] The only clear thing here is that Vico obviously thinks that it is these propositions which will enable him to claim that he is presenting a "science".

The first four of these elements form a group in that they deal with what Vico presents as a set of inter-related ideas. The thesis they present can therefore only be seen after a preliminary survey of the whole four.

Element V states that "To be useful to the human race, philosophy must raise and direct weak and fallen man, not rend his nature or abandon him in his corruption".[2] On the face of it, this looks to be little more than a pious injunction, more appropriate to a moral homily than a philosophy of history.

Some light, however, is thrown on it by the claims made in an explicatory paragraph which succeeds it. In this, Vico begins by asserting that this axiom "dismisses" both the theories of the Stoics and the Epicureans, because "both deny providence". But, "on the other hand", it "admits to our school the political philosophers, and first of all the Platonists, who agree with all the lawgivers on these three points: that there is divine providence, that

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[1] N.S. 163. [2] N.S. 129.

human passions should be moderated and made into human virtues and that the human soul is immortal. Thus from this axiom are derived the three principles of our Science".[1] If we here ignore the final reference to "the three principles of our Science", which will be discussed elsewhere,[2] it would seem that Vico is claiming that it should be one of the functions of philosophy to introduce the notion of progress, though in what capacity is unstated. This I take to be the meaning of the assertion that "philosophy must raise and direct weak and fallen man". Furthermore, he approves of the Platonic notion of divine providence by which this is allegedly done.

Element VI continues with a discussion of the function of philosophy but this time, and without any indications to that effect, in a more critical spirit. It is now stated that "Philosophy considers man as he should be and so can be of service to but very few, who wish to live in the Republic of Plato, not to fall back into the dregs of Romulus".

No explication at all is added to this proposition. At first sight it appears a contradiction that in Element V Vico approves of certain philosophers, including the Platonists and yet here he seems to disapprove of, or at least attribute limited value to, Plato and his notion of an ideal state. The contradiction is removed, however, if we put weight upon the notion that the laudatory view of philosophy in the fifth proposition is a view of what philosophy "must do, if it is "to be useful to the human race"[3]; whereas the critical remarks of Element VI centre on a view as to what philosophy has tended to do rather than what it ought to do.

The critical view, that philosophy has tended not to be very useful, to

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[1] N.S. 130. [2] See Chapter XII below. [3] N.S. 129.

"be of use to but very few", is next contrasted with a view of the function of legislation presented in Element VII. This states that "legislation considers man as he is in order to turn him to good uses in human society. Out of ferocity, avarice and ambition, the three vices which run through the human race, it creates the military, merchant and governing classes, and thus the strength, riches and wisdom of commonwealths. Out of these three great vices, which could certainly destroy all mankind on the face of the earth, it makes civil happiness".[1]

In a corollary to this Vico adds: "This axiom proves that there is divine providence and further that there is a divine legislative mind. For out of the passions of men, each bent on his own private advantage, for the sake of which they would live like wild beasts in the wilderness, it has made the civil orders by which they may live in human society."[2]

In these passages we are introduced to the notion of legislation. Vico conceives it as a sort of force or pressure necessary for the creation and support of the distinct social classes, "the civil orders" by which men may live in human society.

In effect Vico is suggesting that the existence of the latter is not to be explained by the activities of individual man as such. He describes individual man, the raw material, so to speak, on which legislation has to work, as being composed of "ferocity, avarice and ambition" and he emphasises the anti-social nature of these vices by his assertion that they "could certainly destroy all mankind on the face of the earth ..."

Far from doing this, however, under the influence of legislation they become the basis of the three useful and respectable civil orders, the military, merchant and governing classes. Vico is so struck by the outcome of this

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[1] N.S. 132. [2] N.S. 133.

relation between the anti-social material and the transforming social pressure that he is prepared to take it as being tantamount to testimony to divine providence. His argument can be summarised as follows:

1. Men are naturally vicious and if their behaviour were controlled only by their individual natures they would destroy themselves.
2. In fact, however, through the operation of legislation, they are organised into the civil orders in which these natural vices become the basis of a happy social life.
3. These facts prove that there are forces which work for men's good despite his own individual nature, i.e. that there is divine providence.
4. This, in turn, proves the existence of a "divine, legislative mind".

This is a version of the argument from design. It claims first that there is order in the world (in this case, in the world of human society); second, that this cannot be explained naturally (i.e. that it cannot be explained simply as the result of men following out their own desires and wishes); and third, that it must therefore be explained supernaturally, as the result of the working of a supernatural mind.

The weaknesses of such an argument are too well known to need comment here. It is important, however, to note that there are two senses of divine providence involved in it. First, there is the sense of divine providence embodied in the conclusion of the argument: this is divine providence thought of as the work of a supernatural entity, "a divine legislative mind". This sense of divine providence is not important to "The New Science" and Vico's references to it are infrequent. The fact that he brings it in here is explained by his sharing with many philosophers of his time a desire to produce a proof of God's existence.

Second, and much more important, divine providence is thought of as an

immanent force and in this sense it is, in the above argument, virtually identified with legislation. One must note here that it is not to be identified with any specific piece of legislation but with the way in which Vico presents legislation itself, i.e. in the sense isolated in the second of the above propositions, as a sort of force driving men into those civil orders in which they can live happily. We may think of these civil orders as a sort of class structure in society, i.e. a set of organised social relationships. In this case a minimal but safe reading of the notion of divine providence in its immanent sense would be that Vico wishes to indicate by it a certain kind of social force by reference to which he can explain the arising of those organised social relationships which alone can influence individual man's natural vices in such a way as to lead to his continued and happy existence rather than to his destruction.

Here it might be useful to turn to one of the passages in which Vico gives examples of what he takes to be evidence of the operation of divine providence. Such a passage occurs at paragraph 1108, which reads:

> "It is true that men have themselves made this world of nations (and we took this as the first incontestable principle of our Science .....), but this world without doubt has issued from a mind often diverse, at times quite contrary and always superior to the particular ends that men had proposed to themselves; which narrow ends made means to serve wider ends, it has always employed to preserve the human race upon this earth. Men mean to gratify their bestial lust and abandon their offspring, and they inaugurate the chastity of marriage from which the families arise. The fathers mean to exercise without restraint their paternal power over their clients, and they subject them to the civil powers from which the cities arise. The reigning order of nobles mean to abuse their lordly freedom over the plebeians and they are obliged to submit to the laws which establish popular liberty ...."

The passage quoted refers to the various stages in terms of which Vico reads the history of any one nation. First comes the stage of bestiality and lust which is ended by the arising of the institution of marriage and the development of the family unit. This is followed by government by an aristocracy

based on cities. This in turn is followed by the popular commonwealth. And there are yet later stages, not necessary for the understanding of the above passage as far as I have quoted it.

What we must note in these examples is the suggestion that at each stage in which there is a transition from a state of society cohering according to one organising principle to that in which coherence is to be explained by a different principle, the change cannot, says Vico, be explained solely by reference to what those, who are affected by the change, want, consciously or unconsciously, to do. For example, bestial man does not wish to inaugurate the institutions of marriage and family life, yet these, which are for human good, result from activities in which he indulges. Again, in the cities the aristocracy tries selfishly to take full advantage of its position and succeeds only in provoking movements towards popular liberty which deprive it of its unique possession of certain powers. Vico is quite explicit that this does not occur as a deliberate result of "the particular ends men had proposed to themselves". On the other hand it does happen through them. For this is what is implied by his remark that providence has made men's narrow ends into "means to serve wider ends".

The examples here are not specific enough to show exactly how this is done. But they suffice to show that when talking of the action or activity of divine providence Vico intends to draw our attention to the fact that certain changes in social structure and organisation, which tend to preserve society, occur through, but are not fully explained by, individual men's purposive activities.

Bearing this in mind we must now return to the argument presented in Element VII. A consideration of this can throw more light on the logical status of Vico's accounts of man's individual nature and immanent providence.

It is necessary to make two points about Vico's claim that man is ferocious, avaricious and ambitious. In the first place this represents his main interpretation of the previous claim that man is "weak and fallen" and tends to corruption.[1] The theological ring of these phrases suggest that Vico may have taken them over from his orthodox Christian beliefs.

Second, we must note that Vico could not expect us to accept this claim as true simply because it is Christian, for this would render his argument circular. It is obvious that the conclusion Vico wishes to assert, that there is "a divine legislative mind" or God, depends upon accepting that the existence of such a being is the only way of explaining the existence of providence in its immanent aspect i.e. as a social force working for man's welfare. This in turn must be accepted as the only way of explaining the happy and continued existence of a species whose basic instincts are self-destructive. Finally we must also accept that the account of man's self-destructive nature is true. But if the only reason for accepting the latter were that it was enjoined upon one as an article of faith involved in Christian belief then the argument would be circular since acceptance of this premise would depend upon acceptance of the conclusion of the argument.

If the argument is to avoid circularity Vico must produce independent grounds for the truth of his premise concerning man's egoistic nature and its self-destructive tendency. He could do this, and it will be argued later that he tries to do so,[2] by showing that his account of the parts played by men's individual purposes and social pressures in the occurrence of social change forms a complex and internally-related hypothesis in the light of which all the available historical evidence can be consistently interpreted. It

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[1] N.S. 129. [2] See Chapter XVI below.

would thus be empirically supported.[1]

We must beware at this point of thinking that Vico perhaps intended his account of man's vicious nature to apply to some non-social phase of human history. That this is clearly not what he means is revealed in Element VIII which states that "Things do not endure out of their natural state."[2] In a corollary to this Vico goes on to say that, in so far as historical traditions relate, man has always lived in society and therefore it follows, from the above axiom, that to live in society is natural to man.[3]

The first thing to grasp from this is that the previous characterisation of man as ferocious, avaricious and ambitious must not be taken to be a description of man in some pre-social state, perhaps some state of nature. For, as the corollary implies, there has never been such a state. These vices characterise social man.

Apart from making this clear, however, the axiom also introduces a notion which must be accounted one of Vico's fundamental insights. This is the notion of a "natural state" or natural context. In the axiom this notion is applied to "things", an abbreviation for "human things" by which Vico means to refer to human institutions, kinds of activities and ways of behaving and acting. What the axiom is thus asserting is that specific kinds of human activity can only endure in a natural context, that is, where they naturally arise from, and are appropriate to, a certain social context.

This notion of a "natural context" which Vico here introduces, is very important and yet difficult to define exactly. Again, I shall leave the latter

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[1] I do not mean to suggest that Vico's argument is thereby made valid, since the illegitimacy of the move from the existence of an immanent force to a transcendent "legislative mind" is left untouched by the above considerations.

[2] N.S. 134. [3] N.S. 135.

task until its place in Vico's whole project is clearer. For the moment, however, a rough and ready guide to its meaning may be gained by considering it in one of its applications. This requirement lies behind Vico's rejection of the thesis that the Law of Twelve Tables was imported from Greece to Rome. Vico argues instead on behalf of the thesis that the Law of Twelve Tables, in view of its evident importance, must be the product of ways of activity and thought 'natural' to the Romans and therefore must rather be looked on as a codification of existing social habit. Whether Vico was right in this particular instance does not matter. The example is enough to reveal the nature of the principle involved: that human institutions of whatever nature, must correspond to the needs and abilities of those who partake of them.

It is clear that Vico is advocating this principle as a requirement of correct historical interpretation. Seen in this light, it amounts to the principle that historians, when giving an account of a certain institution, must make sure that in their account the institution is shown to be of the sort which could and would arise in the social context as described. It is thus a statement of the need for a consistent and inter-related interpretation of all the many facets of social existence. Vico's conception of what is involved in this will be shown in more detail in the sections in which his view of social relationships is discussed.[1]

It might be profitable now to comment briefly on some points which arise from the four elements considered in this chapter. First there is the suggestion that there is a paradox implicit in the relation between the individual and the

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[1] See Chapters XIII and XIV below.

society in which, and only in which,[1] the individual can exist. For on the one hand we have the implied claim that the individual's own behaviour can only be explained in terms of drives which are basically destructive of the social context in which alone he can survive; yet on the other we know that society in some sense consists of the activities of individual men. It thus seems that its career both should be, and yet cannot be, explained by those forces which explain man's individual activities. Vico says nothing explicit about how this difficulty arises but from his solution it seems clear that it does so as a result of attempting to apply the wrong explanatory categories to the matter in hand, i.e. as a result of trying to explain both changes in individual activity and in the structure of social activity by means of the same category.

Vico's solution is in effect to argue that such a procedure embodies a type mistake and to bring in a new explanatory category to deal with the changes in social structure. This is the notion of divine providence in its immanent aspect. The transcendent aspect of divine providence hardly reappears at all in "The New Science", thus indicating that it is peripheral to the themes of real importance in Vico's theory. Of course, if the notion of an immanent providence is to be anything more than a label we shall need to know much more about how it works.[2]

Finally what has been said here is enough to give us an idea of at least one of the senses in which Vico uses the term 'axiom'. It would seem that in the above he is offering an account of the framework for true history by advocating the use of certain descriptive and explanatory categories and offering

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[1] I take this to be the full force of the requirement stated in Element VIII, as it is developed later in "The New Science". Cf. Chapters V(ii) and VI below.

[2] See Chapter V(ii) below.

rules and criteria in support of these. Thus Element V presents a view as to what the philosopher must do in order to "be useful" in this project, i.e. adduce the explanatory category of divine providence; while Element VI states what he should not do - busy himself with the construction of unattainable ideal social models. Element VII gives an account of the relation between legislation and those orders necessary for man's social existence which at least in part shows how the category of divine providence can effectively be applied. Element VIII states the requirement that all this should be done in a consistent manner. It seems that here Vico's axioms have either the character of recommendations as to procedures which should or should not be adopted or, as in Element VII, state the philosophical theories on which such recommendations would rest. If this is so we may expect Vico, at some later point, to turn to the questions whether his recommendations ought to be accepted and what should constitute the test for their acceptance.[1]

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[1] See Chapter XVI below.

CHAPTER V

The New Science

(i)

Vico's intention, implicit in the very title of his work, of producing a Science, can be understood only through his accounts of the distinctions between the true and the certain, and between philosophy and philology. These form the subject matter of elements IX to XIII.

The first of these distinctions to be mentioned is that between what is true and what is certain. This occurs in Element IX in which it is stated that "men who do not know the truth of things try to reach the certain, so that if they cannot satisfy their intellects by science, their wills at least may rest on consciousness".[1]

This highly obscure axiom first adopts the traditional suggestion that what one "knows" is the truth. It then goes on to suggest that where one cannot reach the truth, for reasons unspecified, one looks for "the certain", on the ground that, if one cannot satisfy the intellect "by science", the will may rest on "consciousness".

This latter suggestion implies that "the certain" is a sort of second-best, to be accepted only in default of knowledge of the true. What is not clear, however, is whether "the certain" is the weaker counterpart of knowledge or of truth. And if this is not clear then neither is it clear how "consciousness", which is somehow related to "the certain", operates here.

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[1] N.S. 137. I have here adopted the practice of translating Vico's "coscienza" uniformly as consciousness, as do Bergin and Fisch in their revised translation.

To clarify this obscurity we must turn to Element X. Here Vico states that "Philosophy contemplates reason, whence comes knowledge of the true; philology observes that of which human choice is author, whence comes consciousness of the certain".[1] In this axiom the alternatives are "knowledge of the true", which is more or less identical with the stronger alternative of the previous axiom, and "consciousness of the certain". This suggests that "knowledge" is to be contrasted with "consciousness" and "truth" with "the certain". Thinking of this on the lines of the Platonic model, we might surmise that knowledge and consciousness are states of mind, the true and the certain their objects.

But before trying to come to conclusions as to Vico's meaning here, we must make a brief review of his other remarks in this context. These are contained in two paragraphs appended to Element X.

The first of these asserts that the element, by connecting the subject matter of the philologian with "that of which human choice is author", defines philologians as "all the grammarians, historians, critics, who have occupied themselves with the study of the languages and deeds of peoples: both of their domestic affairs, such as customs and laws, and their external affairs, such as wars, peaces, alliances, travels and commerce".[2] From this it is clear that Vico includes under the term "philologian" all that we today might include under 'historian', taking this, in its very widest sense, to include also what we now mean by 'philologist', in so far as the latter is an historian of language.

In the second corollary Vico goes on to make the important claim that "this axiom shows how the philosophers failed by half in not confirming their reasonings by appeal to the authority of the philologians, and likewise how the

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[1] N.S. 138. [2] N.S. 139.

latter failed by half in not taking care to give their authority the sanction of truth by appeal to the reasonings of the philosophers. If they had both done this they would have been more useful to their commonwealths and they would have anticipated us in conceiving this Science".[1] By implication, we can see from this that what is going to justify the claim of "The New Science" to be a science is that it, in doing what both philosophers and philologians have failed to do, "will confirm ..... (its) reasonings by appeal to the authority of the philologians, and ..... give authority the sanction of truth, by appeal to the reasonings of the philosophers".

In order to discover in what the rapprochement of philosophy and history consists we must first ascertain how Vico conceives the nature of each discipline in its independent and pre-Vichian state. It is not difficult to come to some general conclusions about the nature of philosophy because Vico's remarks about this are couched in a traditional terminology. Thus he has told us that "Philosophy contemplates reason, whence comes knowledge of the true ..."[2] This remark is to be taken as a description of what philosophers have hitherto taken themselves to be doing. Since Vico would almost certainly have Plato or Descartes in mind, we may take the axiom to mean that philosophy has been concerned with knowledge of necessary truths by means of a purely conceptual enquiry, that is, "by contemplating reason".

On the other hand, Vico's account of the work of the philologian, or historian, is rendered obscure by his undefined use of his own terminology. "Philology", he tells us, "observes that of which human choice is author, whence comes consciousness of the certain". This cannot be interpreted until we understand the meanings of "consciousness" and "certain".

We have already seen that there may be some grounds for taking "consciousness"

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[1] N.S. 140. [2] N.S. 138.

to be a cognitive state similar to, but on a lower epistemological level than, knowledge. We have also seen that "the certain" can be taken to be the object of consciousness in the same sense as "the true" is the object of knowledge.

Now, in the Platonic and Cartesian models which, I have suggested, Vico may have in mind here, the objects of knowledge, the true, consist in necessary or eternal truths. Plato, with whom, as we have seen, Vico is to a certain degree in sympathy, also contrasted belief in contingent fact with knowledge of necessary truths, claiming that knowledge relates to the real as belief relates to the phenomenal.

We can straightaway see that Vico is following Plato's descriptive model in his account of the nature of philology or history to the extent that, where Plato refused to accord the same epistemological status to the state of mind of philosopher and non-philosopher, Vico likewise refuses to accord the same epistemological status to the state of mind of philosopher and historian. Thus they are distinguished as "knowledge" and "consciousness" in Element X.

The similarity, however, goes further than this. Plato argues[1] that the state of mind of the non-philosopher should be thought of as being that with which those who could not reach philosophy must make do. Vico has suggested that when men cannot reach truth they "try to reach the certain ..... so that ..... their wills at least may rest on consciousness". Here it is clearly implied that consciousness is a second best to which men turn when knowledge is unobtainable. In view of this, we are, I think, justified in taking the notion of consciousness to be in some respects similar to the notion of belief in Plato.

Following this line of thought, we might look for the meaning of "the certain", the objects of consciousness, as being similar to Plato's objects

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[1] "The Republic" Book V.

of belief. The latter were, of course, particular and contingent things. There is some evidence in "The New Science" that by "the certain" Vico means "the particular",[1] a reading which would support the above identification. But perhaps the best evidence that this is what Vico intends is to be found in the statement of the second part of Element X that "philology observes that of which human choice is author, whence comes consciousness of the certain". The suggestion here is that "the certain", the objects of "consciousness", are those things which, in some unspecified sense, are created by human choice. Clearly, if these things are created by human choice, that is, freely created by human beings, they are not necessary but contingent, not universal but particular.

It thus seems that, if we take "the certain" to be particular, contingent things, we have a sense in which the objects of knowledge and consciousness (belief) differ in ways appropriate to their different epistemological statuses and in terms of which the distinctions Vico is trying to draw between the nature of the work of the philosopher, as hitherto conceived, and the historian are intelligible. When the obscure terminology is penetrated he appears to be saying little more than that the philosopher is, or has been, concerned to produce knowledge of necessary, universal truths through conceptual means, and the historian to produce belief about particular and contingent fact.

It is time now to turn to the rapprochement of philosophy and history which, in the second corollary of Element X, Vico implies will be achieved in "The New Science". The effect of this rapprochement will be "to confirm" the reasonings of philosophers by appeal to the authority of the historians, while giving the latter "the sanction of truth by appeal to the reasoning of the

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[1] Cf. N.S. 321, in which Vico translates the Latin "certum" as "particularised" and points to a contrasting sense of "certum" and "commune".

philosophers". Here we have arrived at the key sense in which "The New Science" can be called a philosophy of history. In the light of the above elucidation of meanings it can be seen that what Vico is proposing is a system of thought in which philosophical truths and particular historical facts can be brought into such a relationship that we shall be able to claim knowledge of historical fact rather than mere belief. On the face of it this would seem an impossible undertaking for if what is created by human choice is always particular it can never be the object of knowledge, hence there can be no new science. To see how Vico deals with this difficulty we require further insight into the nature of the obscure but highly important relationship between philosophical truth and historical fact. For this we turn to the next elements.

(ii)

For a clue to the nature of these elements we must remember what Vico's task now involves. On the one hand he wants to produce a "science" and he identifies the subject matter of history with that created by human choice, clearly some kind of human activity. In effect he has to show the possibility of a science in respect of some part of human activities and affairs. On the other hand, "science has to do with what is universal and eternal".[1] The conjunction of these propositions means that Vico is committed to finding, in the subject matter of human affairs, that which is universal and eternal. These next elements must be read in the light of such an enquiry.

Element XI states: "Human choice, by its nature most uncertain, is made certain and determined by the common sense of men with respect to human

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[1] N.S. 163.

needs or utilities, which are the two origins of the natural law of nations".[1]

Here there is a contrast between two conditions of human choice. In one it is "uncertain" and this connects with the very "nature" of human choice. In the other, when it is conditioned by "the common sense of men with respect to human needs or utilities", it is "made certain and determined".

To understand this we must know what is this "common sense" to which Vico refers. The next axiom offers a definition of this notion. "Common sense", we are told, is "judgment without reflection, shared by an entire class, an entire people, an entire nation, or the whole human race".[2]

The first point to be noted is that the common sense is "shared by an entire class, an entire people, an entire nation or the whole human race". We must pay particular attention to what is here omitted. Vico does not say that it is held by an individual even though the classes or groups he refers to are in one sense composed of individuals. Is this merely an oversight or has Vico omitted mention of the individual on the grounds that an individual qua individual cannot "share" a common sense judgment in the same way as the groups mentioned?

We may disregard the suggestion that the omission represents an oversight on Vico's part. If we took this view it would be difficult to see why he should have worded his definition in this particular way. He might just as well have said that a common sense judgment can be held by any individual or aggregate of individuals, without giving examples of the sort of aggregate he had in mind.

To understand his meaning we require first some idea of the sorts of classes he talks of in "The New Science". We have already encountered some

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[1] N.S. 141. [2] N.S. 142.

of these. In Element VII he referred to "the military, merchant and governing classes". In Paragraph 1108 he spoke of the fathers, the families, the clients, the nobles and the monarchs. These examples suggest that he is thinking of social, economic and political classes.

Three things should be noted about such classes. First, they are not essentially organised classes; they can be organised but they need not be. For example, in Vico's account of the course of national history, a class such as the clients may organise themselves to put pressure on the nobles but a class such as the monarchs, say, do not organise themselves to resist pressure from their subjects. Second, these classes are not essentially exclusive; again some are and some are not. One cannot be both a client and a noble but one can be both a monarch and a member of a family. Third, one's activities as a member of such a class are not essentially self-conscious. By this I mean that one need not act knowingly as a member of such a class in order to act as a member. In Vico's account the pressure put upon the fathers by the clients is not necessarily self-conscious in this sense.

All this suggests that to be a member of such a class is to have a certain social, economic or political role, or, what is the same thing, to act in a certain capacity. For to have such roles it is neither necessary to be part of organised groups nor to be confined to one kind of role nor when acting in a certain capacity is it necessary to know that one is doing so.

If this is the correct way to take these classes then Vico's suggestion is that a certain kind of choice made by persons sharing the same social role is "determined" or explained by factors ("human needs or utilities") relevant to the social context of the role itself, taking the latter in its total historical and social situation, rather than by personal and individual fac-

tors. Since the relevant factors are the same for all persons of a particular social kind in a particular historical and social setting then, if these factors really "determine" the decision taken, the decision will be the same in all cases for persons of the same kind. We must note that Vico is not saying that decisions made by an individual qua individual are not to be explained by individual factors; it is decisions taken in certain social capacities which are not to be explained by them.

We require to know why this should be so. To have a social role, in Vico's account of history, renders one liable to have certain beliefs, interests, needs and problems, to feel in a certain way the effects of certain social pressures and forces (e.g. as suggested in Element VII, that of legislation) and to help exert other pressures and forces, in common with others sharing the same roles and capacities. The fathers will have the common problem of unruly and dissatisfied clients, the clients a common need for an extension of their civic and legal rights to allow them to enjoy to the full the new possibilities opening up for them. The only problems or needs one would have to have in any given capacity would be those which affected one through one's role taken in its social setting and these would be problems in relation to other social roles, exacerbated by the basically vicious nature of those occupying the roles. Thus in view of human nature it is common to all clients to have the problem of deciding what to do in fact of the tyrannous conduct of the fathers: and to all the fathers to have the problem of deciding what to do in fact of their rebellious and ambitious clients. Given that the attendant problems of, and strains between, different social roles are always the same, which they will be if they are conditioned by factors intrinsic to the relationships between the roles involved, Vico is suggesting that those who occupy those roles always come

to the same decisions about these problems. If this suggestion were accepted it would follow that any history of the same classes in different nations would show the same sequence of decisions and, as a result, the sequence of changing social relationships would exhibit the same pattern.

We can think of Vico's suggestion in the following way. Individual man is basically vicious and dissatisfied. This dissatisfaction leads him to put pressure on others. He exerts this through his social role. As all men are vicious conflicting social pressures are constantly being exerted, the outcome of which is some sort of redefinition of social roles together with their attendant legal and civic rights and disabilities. Here we explain why there should be any social movement and change at all by reference to man's vicious nature, but the character of the outcome of that movement is explained by factors pertaining to the structure of the over-all social context. By virtue of their common sense men dictate what this outcome should be.

Vico talks of the common sense as a sort of judgment, "judgment without reflection". My suggestion so far is that the nature of such judgments is dictated ("determined") by factors related to one's social, economic or political position, and they result in a redefinition of the structure of the social context in such a way as to alleviate some of the discontent involved. The sort of redefinition Vico has in mind is revealed by his reference to "the common sense of men with respect to human needs or utilities" as "the two origins of the natural law of nation". By this latter phrase Vico does not mean to refer merely to enacted law,[1] but to the whole legal order or system, including common law based upon customary procedures, i.e. including customary

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[1] See the revised translation of "The New Science" by Bergin and Fisch, Introduction, p. xxxii. Cf. also Chapter VII below.

rights, privileges and responsibilities. In effect he is thinking of the structure of a way of life.

We must note also the determining factors, the "human needs or utilities". I have suggested that these are the needs or utilities of people inherent in, i.e. as conditioned by, their social position. It must not be thought that these are some sort of objective or impersonal needs which determine people's choice irrespective of their wishes and purposes, for the situation in which they exist is none other than the world of human wishes, purposes and activities. What Vico is insisting on is the importance of realising the effect of the overall social structure upon the character of these wishes and purposes. The "needs and utilities" of the situation are therefore what people see to be needful or useful from the point of view of their social roles. This is really the point of the obscure notion of a common sense. Vico is saying that social structure and change in social structure are to be explained by what strikes people as necessary or useful in the social situation in which they find themselves; and the relevant and effective aims and purposes here are those which one holds in common with others in the same situation. In effect, the course of history, insofar as that is identified with the history of social, economic and political structure, is determined by social, economic and political (Vico's useful generic term is "human") pressures exerted in the common pursuit of certain purposes and aims for the fulfilment of certain "human" necessities and utilities. Moreover, as we shall see, the same factors which are relevant to the explanation of a change in social structure are relevant to the explanation of the new structure. In other words we understand the new structure by understanding the needs and utilities it satisfies.

It would be a mistake to take Vico's remarks here on too narrow a basis,

i.e. as relevant only to the changing relationships between different social, economic and political classes. In Vico's sequence a common sense judgment can be held by "an entire class, an entire people, an entire nation or the whole human race".[1] As suggested these are not exclusive divisions. At a certain stage in history one may be a member of a class, a nation and the whole human race at once. It is clear that those common sense judgments one then shares in one's national or one's human capacity will not be concerned with the question how to regulate or modify social, political or economic inter-relationships. They will be judgments about the national duty or what is owing to people qua human beings irrespective of distinctions of class. It is important to notice that these more general common sense judgments, or the kinds of activities in which they result, form a framework within which the less general operate. Thus, today, judgments about one's rights as a human being provide a context without which we could not understand the nature of judgments about social or economic redefinition.

An example of this occurs in connection with Vico's own account of the accruing of monarchic powers to the heads of families in early societies. According to this, early man's acutely developed powers of imagination and poorly developed reason soon lead him to conceive of a realm of cruel gods who control his destiny. Under these circumstances everyone will see, i.e. form the common sense judgment, that the only thing to be done is to placate these gods with gifts and sacrifices and to try to read their wishes by the art of divination. A science of divination and a class of priests will arise as a result of the attempt to do this. At this period of history the basic social,

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[1] Vico is here using "human" in a more limited sense than that just mentioned, to refer to the characteristics of a people at their highest state of development, i.e. in the age of reason.

economic and political unit is the family. Such an institution can only arise when some men conceive that its acceptance will be pleasing to the gods. In these circumstances it is natural for the fathers of these families to gather to themselves the roles of sage (reader of the auspices), priest (preparer of sacrifices) and lawgiver and thus to strengthen their social, political and economic position. In this way class inter-relationships are strengthened and supported by common sense judgments of a much more general nature. It is these circumstances which explain why in the later class struggles between fathers and their dependents, the latter are necessarily in the position of legal underdogs.

It is not yet clear in what sense common sense judgments are "without reflection". There is no suggestion in "The New Science" that men take decisions without in some way being aware that they do so. So it is improbable that Vico thinks of such judgments as merely instinctive. An alternative suggestion is that when a decision is taken by virtue of one's common sense, i.e. when it is made in a certain capacity, then the nature of the decision or choice is not determined by, say, one's individual intelligence or the level of one's reflections on the matter, but by factors (the "human needs or utilities") which lie in the total social situation itself. This would certainly explain why Vico thought that, even in the case of the rudest and most unthinking periods of human history, all men of certain types will, in the same kind of situation, hold the same beliefs and purposes and try to act in the same way.

If this is correct Vico is introducing a deterministic element into the explanation of human affairs. It is necessary to note the extent of the proper application of this element. In the first place it does not apply to

individual activities as such. It is not what one individual will decide to do that is determined, but the kind of thing. The exact arrangements a monarch will make to strengthen his own position will vary in the case of different monarchs but the decisions of all monarchs will have the same general character - they will try to render their subjects weak by debasing them.

Nor does the above apply necessarily to all the decisions of any individual. Only those decisions which are in fact, even if unknowingly, taken in a certain capacity are determined and then, of course, only in their general outlines.

Nor again does it follow (that) in those cases where an individual's decision is determined by his social position that the activity of the whole individual is determined. For example, Vico does not take himself to be committed to the view that one's individual motives are determined by one's role. This comes out in a striking passage in which Vico talks of the relation between personal desires and the resultant activity:

> "But men, because of their corrupted nature, are under the tyranny of self-love, which compels them to make private utility their chief guide. Seeking everything useful for themselves and nothing for their companions, they cannot bring their passions under control to direct them towards justice. We thereby establish the fact that man in the bestial state desires only his own welfare; having taken wife and begotten children he desires his own welfare along with that of his family; having entered upon civil life he desires his own welfare along with that of his city; when his rule is extended over several peoples he desires his own welfare along with that of the nation .... In all these circumstances man desires principally his own utility..."[1]

This quotation makes it abundantly clear that one's desires are inspired by self-interest, a variation of the theme that man is "weak and

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[1] N.S. 341.

fallen", which has already been mentioned. One's desires are therefore not determined in the same way as the judgments of common sense, i.e. by factors pertaining to one's social position. But through one's various social capacities, one's position as member of the family, the city or the people, one's self-interest carries with it an identity of interest with others who share the same social standing. It is not the case that one is under some external necessity to seek certain things, but, through one's various social roles, one comes to have an identity of interest with other equally self-interested individuals.

If this is correct Vico's suggestion amounts to this. The reasons why there should be change at all are to be found in the self-interested nature of the individual, his "ferocity, avarice and ambition". Individual activities, explicable by these factors, represent the efficient cause of change. But, given that there is a movement for change, the effective aims involved in this movement are determined by factors such as needs, interests, bonds, stresses and pressures which subsist in the over-all context and which affect one through one's various social roles. The notion of a common sense is brought in to explain how men should always choose to act in the same way when faced with these factors.

It is important next to notice that Vico's suggestion of a common sense thought of as a choosing faculty has no explanatory value. This is because the onus of the explanation of any choice of social purpose or aim is borne by the above factors which affect one through one's social roles. In other words, the fact that one had a purpose in common with others would be fully explained by showing that one had interests in common with them, that one faced the same social problems and was open to the same pressures and stresses. If factors of this sort are accepted as being adequate to explain

one's own choice of action then they must also be adequate to explain a similar choice exercised by somebody else in the same sort of situation. Nothing therefore is added by way of explanation by the introduction of a common sense. For the latter amounts to little more than a faculty for making the decisions one does in face of the problems one encounters in one's various social capacities.

It is important also to notice a grave confusion which attaches to Vico's account of providence in its immanent aspect as a result of this. The first point to note here is that in these theoretical pronouncements Vico fails to distinguish adequately between the purpose and the outcome of a certain kind of social pressure. In Paragraph 1108 he made the point that the outcome of men's individual purposes could not be thought of as the realisation of those purposes. This is explained by the fact that man lives necessarily in a social context; the outcome of activities initiated through individual self-interest is therefore determined by the social context, an important feature of which is the various social purposes and ends of men. What Vico is eventually going to argue is that if we know the nature of all these social features we can predict their outcome. This is a plausible contention which will bear some examination. What is relevant here, however, is the notion that a knowledge of social purposes will be helpful in determining the outcome of social activity.

But in Paragraph 1108 Vico makes the mistake of assuming that whatever the outcome of purposive social activity this position must be the realisation of some single purpose. Since there are often no social classes which aim at the particular position which ensues he is then able to bring in providence in its immanent aspect as the possessor of that single purpose of which this

outcome could be taken to be the realisation. Vico thus makes the mistake of thinking that because any redefinition of social relationships is at least partly explained by reference to the pursuit of various social purposes it follows that the redefinition itself is the realisation of a purpose.

The emptiness of the notion of a common sense as a choosing faculty helps to explain how this mistake came about. Vico is keenly alive to the need to exclude any occult aspect from his account of social progress. He insists strongly in Paragraph 1108 that providence works through "the particular ends that men had proposed to themselves", making these "means" to its own wider ends. These wider ends are, of course, none other than the judgments of the common sense. Apart from such judgments as are held by a class or social group, Vico asserts, as we have seen, that they can also be held by "an entire nation or the whole human race". Thus if we thought that by adducing the faculty of the common sense we could explain how various groups came to have purposes in common, it would be tempting to think of social organisation and reorganisation at the widest level as the realisation of purposes produced by the common sense of these widest of all groups. We would then see the total outcome of the redefinition of social relationships as the realisation of a judgment of the common sense of one entire nation or the whole human race.

But if, as suggested, this whole notion of a common sense is empty and superfluous then the notion of an immanent providence, insofar as it is identified with it, is also empty and superfluous. It follows also that there will be some aspect of the way in which Vico wants to explain the nature of social relationships and social change which is superfluous. This is to be found in his assumption that the outcome of purposive behaviour necessarily

be itself thought of as the realisation of a single purpose. This is clearly unacceptable.

To see that Vico is guilty of the above confusions we may turn first to the following example in which the emptiness of the notion of a common sense is revealed by its very absence. Vico thinks that at the stage of history in which aristocratic commonwealths invariably spring up certain social factors are always present. He writes:

> "For at the point when the commonwealths were to spring forth, the matter was all prepared and ready to receive the form, and there issued from them the format[1] of the commonwealths composed of mind and body. The prepared materials were men's own religions, their own languages, their own nuptials, their own names (clans and houses) their own arms and hence their own magistrates and finally their own laws".[2]

All the factors which are relevant here are social rather than individual and there is no mention at all of the common sense, i.e. of any single purpose directed at the production of a commonwealth. Vico is quite certain that should the above social, economic and political factors be present the stage of the aristocratic commonwealth will result. The common sense is not required to explain the change, which we can understand without having to think of it as the realisation of some single purpose. Such an explanation as would be provided by the latter is therefore superfluous.

This contention can be supported also by the following reason. If Vico's suggestion is empty then it must be the case that if the course of a nation's history is determined in its general outlines one can show that at any stage in its history there is only one direction in which it can

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[1] Vico refers to 'il formato' here. This has the meaning of form, shape or nature or, as I have been referring to it, structure.

[2] N.S. 630.

proceed and that direction is necessitated by factors other than the possession of a common sense. That Vico himself believed this will become apparent later when it will be shown that from a knowledge of such factors he tried to deduce the course of a nation's history.[1]

I conclude that the notion of a common sense as a sort of faculty is empty and its introduction based upon a mistake. Through it Vico tried to provide a mechanism which would explain why, when the determining conditions were the same, the sequence of decisions taken in the history of different nations would be the same. But if the conditions alluded to are really sufficient to determine the sequence of decisions there is no need for such a mechanism. Its work has already been done by the conditions themselves.

Once this confusion has been removed we are in a position to see that when Vico talks of a common sense this is a way of referring to those social purposes which it is necessary to bring in to help explain social pressures and forces. When he says that a common sense is shared by a class or a nation this is a way of saying that people sharing a social or national capacity will have some identity of interests, problems and, in general, outlook. In saying that their choice is determined by "human needs or utilities" he is saying that their purposes and aims are determined by what they take to be necessary or useful in their various capacities. Similarly when he talks of that aspect of providence in its immanent sense which is closely related to the common sense we may take him to be talking in the above ways. What we must reject, however, is the suggestion that any outcome of the interplay of the various social factors must necessarily be thought of as

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[1] See Chapter XVII below.

the realisation of some one purpose held either by one of the pressure groups themselves or, in lieu of these, by divine providence.

(iii)

We may now consider Element XIII, which must be read in the light of Vico's attempt to find in the subject matter of human affairs that which is "universal and eternal". The axiom states: "Uniform ideas originating among entire peoples unknown to each other must have a common ground of truth".[1] Vico then claims that "This axiom is a great principle which establishes the common sense of the human race as the criterion taught to the nations by divine providence to define what is certain in the natural law of nations. And the nations reach this certainty by understanding the underlying unity which, despite variations of detail, obtains among them all in respect of this law. Thence issues the mental dictionary for assigning origins to all the diverse articulated languages. By means of this dictionary is conceived the ideal eternal history which determines the histories in time of all the nations....."[2]

To clarify the axiom itself we might begin by asking what are the 'ideas' to which it refers. From the corollary, in which the common sense of the human race is referred to as a criterion, and from what we have just discovered concerning the nature of common sense we can begin by assuming that the ideas referred to are none other than these judgments. In this case what the axiom asserts is that where we can find "uniform" judgments of the common sense, i.e. the same or similar kinds of social needs and aims origina-

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[1] N.S. 144.

[2] N.S. 145. I have modified the translation of Bergin and Fisch here, translating "intendere" as "to understand" in place of their "to recognise" and "l'unita" as "unity" in place of their "agreements". The latter seems to me particularly misleading.

ting among different peoples independently of one another, we are entitled to assume they have a "common ground of truth".

We have seen from certain identifications and equivalences made by Vico that by "truth" he means "universal and eternal" truths. In now claiming that where we can find identical judgments originating independently among different peoples we are entitled to assume a "common ground of truth" he can therefore only mean that we are entitled to assume that we have discovered "the universal and eternal".

Put thus prima facie the most plausible interpretation of the axiom would be that it represents the application to the subject matter of the kinds of human activity, and specifically to that of a kind of human ideas, of one of the main presuppositions of the physical sciences. For a presupposition of the latter is that where invariable correlations can be discovered between the behaviour of phenomena under a wide enough variety of conditions we are entitled to assert that what we have discovered are universal and necessary laws concerning the nature of the phenomena in question. In a somewhat similar way Vico's axiom may be read as the claim that where we can find an underlying pattern of agreement or similarity in the conditions under which the different kinds of social needs and aims arise and determine the different kinds of social activity and institutions we are entitled to assert that what we have discovered is nothing other than a system of universal and necessary laws concerning the nature of the subject matter in question.

This is a very broad reading of the axiom. It suggests that Vico thinks we can discern an actual pattern to the kinds of human activities and thinking where the axiom itself talks merely of finding "uniform" ideas. It suggests also that we can discover the laws of this pattern where the

axiom talks only of their having "a common ground of truth". Yet it is a plausible reading and fits in well with at least one possible reading of the claims and axioms which follow.

This can be shown by a brief consideration of the paragraph which succeeds the axiom.[1] In this the following distinct claims are made:

(i) The axiom establishes common sense as "the criterion" by which may be defined "what is certain" in the natural law of nations.

(ii) This "certainty" is reached by understanding the "underlying unity" which obtains between nations in respect of their natural law.

(iii) From this understanding of the "underlying unity" we can derive a "mental dictionary" for assigning origins to all the various languages.

(iv) By means of this dictionary we arrive at "the ideal eternal history which determines the histories in time of all the nations".

These claims can be read in a way which supports, and is supported by, the interpretation of Element XIII under consideration. In the latter the axiom is taken to state the philosophical rule whereby we are entitled to assert a universal and necessary status for statements of invariable correlations between kinds of facts, i.e. in Vico's terminology, by which we may convert "the certain" (particular fact) into the truth (that which is universal and eternal). To do this we require to know which are the kinds of facts in question. The first of the above claims can be taken to assert that these are the judgments of the common sense, i.e. the social needs and aims of the human race.

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[1] N.S. 145.

The second claim asserts that this subject matter is reached when we understand "the underlying unity" which obtains between the natural law of the different nations. This can be taken to state that the method is that of comparative analysis applied, of course, to these judgments. In effect this is one of the methods by which the scientist tries to discover physical laws, applied to a different subject matter.

In the third claim it is asserted that we shall by this means discover a "mental dictionary" and, in the fourth, that from this we shall reach the "ideal eternal history which determines the history in time of all nations". The notion of a "mental dictionary" may here be obscure but in asserting that from it we shall reach the "ideal eternal history" Vico is making a claim that can be understood in the light of the interpretation of Element XIII under consideration. For the "ideal eternal history" which is reached will be none other than the system of laws, universal and necessary, which we may derive from our comparative study of common sense as it appears in the histories of various nations.

Yet although Vico's language lends itself to such an interpretation I think this is an incorrect way to interpret him. My principal reason for taking this view is that the suggested method is not carried out in practice by Vico when he comes to give an account of the history of the various nations.

The essence of the above interpretation lies in the suggestion that a pattern of laws, the "ideal eternal history" can be abstracted from history, by a comparative analysis of the various histories, in which we try to find what is common to them. On this view the establishment of the "ideal eternal history" must be thought of as a second-order activity, subsequent to and dependent upon the writing of acceptable history.

I shall show later that this is not how to take the notion of an "ideal eternal history", as revealed by Vico's practice. In the latter it has the character of a deductive model which underlies the writing of acceptable history. On this view we reach the laws of human history when we discover a deductive model which underlies acceptable histories of all nations, i.e. when we can find a model in relation to which the histories of all nations may be looked upon as instances.

These two theories are thus from one point of view incompatible. In the first the construction of an "ideal eternal history" is a second-order activity, subsequent to the construction of actual histories. In the second the construction of an "ideal eternal history" is a condition of writing acceptable history and so is part of a first-order activity.

It is of fundamental importance to an understanding of "The New Science" that we should be able to decide between these possibilities. The question how one is to arrive at the "ideal eternal history" will have repercussions first upon its relation to empirical fact and thence upon the logical status to be accorded it. One's interpretation of the whole of "The New Science" and one's assessment of Vico as a thinker cannot fail to be affected by these issues.

In considering what one should conclude here, I shall assume what I shall later establish, i.e. that, as mentioned above, Vico's practice conforms to the second type of account.[1] In this case three possibilities present themselves. We may hold first that the first type of account, the abstraction account, represents the correct way to take Element XIII and its corollaries. In this case we must conclude that Vico had an incorrect theoretical grasp of his actual practice. Second, we may hold that the abstraction account, which *prima facie* seems most plausible, is an incorrect presentation of Vico's

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[1] This is established in a discussion running through chapters XII to XIV. The final position is summarised in Chapter XVII.

meaning in Element XIII and its corollaries, and rests upon a misreading of Vico's loose and largely undefined terminology. This interpretation would be more flattering to Vico as a thinker, though not as an expositor, than the former. To show that there is any possibility of this view being correct it would be necessary to suggest an alternative reading of the passages whose interpretation has lent prima facie support to the abstraction theory and show that these can support the deductive theory. Third, we may hold that the truth lies somewhere between the two, which is my own conclusion. To establish at just which point between the two the truth lies requires taking into account much more of "The New Science" than has so far come under consideration.[1] But to show that such a view is even possibly correct it would be necessary to go part of the way towards establishing the second possibility, i.e. it would be necessary to suggest a reading of Element XIII and its corollaries which is to some extent consistent with the deductive account.

The following suggestion would have this character. The abstraction theory is rendered plausible by two features. The first is that Vico has so far made no mention of a deductive model underlying the interpretation of acceptable history. If we accept that he does believe that there is such a relation between model and history and that he believes further that the same model underlies our understanding of all histories[2] there would be no need for the use of the abstraction method to derive the pattern underlying these histories. Vico talks of "understanding the underlying unity" which obtains between the different histories. In the abstraction account I suggested this

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[1] See Chapter XVIII below.

[2] This position is established in Chapter XVIII.

could mean something like "deriving by comparative analysis". It could equally well mean "understanding the different histories as instances of the same model", which would be consistent with the deductive account.

Second, the abstraction theory takes Vico's account whereby we first "reach ..... certainty" by understanding the underlying unity, from which issues "the mental dictionary" and then the "ideal eternal history", to involve successive steps of the same kind, i.e. it takes Vico's suggestion to be that first we abstract what is common to the judgments of the common sense, then we derive a "mental dictionary for assigning origins to all the various languages" and from this we derive the "ideal eternal history", i.e. the laws of historical, social progress. But this only seems plausible if one assumes, as one obviously ought not, that Vico is engaged in the same sort of procedure as a contemporary social scientist might be, i.e. that he is looking for statistical correlations derived from history without being too much concerned with questions about the acceptability of the history from which such correlations are to be derived.

If we repair Vico's omission here by introducing the notion of a deductive model as a basis for the interpretation of historical evidence the passage allows of a different reading. The deductive model will try to establish a sequence of common sense judgments as the basis for the interpretation of any history. Element XIII itself can be taken to claim that where this sequence can be confirmed to arise in the case of all histories we are entitled to claim that it embodies the laws to which those histories conform. The steps mentioned in the corollary may be taken as an expansion of this account. In effect they can be read as follows:

(i) We know that it is the common sense which determines ("defines") the natural law of nations.

(ii) (Practically a repetition of the element itself.) We are entitled to claim that we have found the law of the sequence of social aims and needs when we find a sequence which is instantiated in all histories.

(iii) We have found this when we find that sequence which provides a "mental dictionary" suitable to understanding the history of all languages.

(iv) Because it provides a key for the understanding of the history of all languages we can confer the status of historical laws upon the original model.

This account suggests that Vico is thinking of the pattern of history, the "ideal eternal history" rather as a sort of Platonic essence which governs the history of each nation. We discover the essence when we find the pattern by which we can make sense of the history of each nation and of the historical evidence relating to that history.

Such an account is at least consistent with the passages under consideration. One could hardly say it was established by them but Vico's terminology is so opaque that no account could legitimately claim to be established by them.

The deductive account is, however, supported by a further factor. Vico talks of "The New Science" as involving a rapprochment between the work of the historian and that of the philosopher. He implies that the philosophers will give "certainty to their reasonings by appeal to the authority of the philologians" and the latter will give "their authority the sanction of truth by appeal to the reasoning of the philosophers".[1]

It is now pertinent to ask: what would be the nature of this rapprochement on the two views under consideration? What, for example, could the philosopher be doing on the abstraction account? Truth here would be a set of laws induc-

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[1] N.S. 140.

tively established. The philosopher might therefore be thought of as a social scientist. But what are "the reasonings" to which he would thus be giving "certainty"? There appears to be no place for them.

Second, as we have mentioned, the work of the philosopher, taken now as social scientist, seems to presuppose that of the historian. How then can that of the former give "the sanction of truth" to that of the latter? It is difficult to see any answer to these questions on this view.

The deductive account can answer these questions. The function of "the reasonings" of the philosopher is to provide a deductive model, which underlies the writing of history. This is "given certainty", i.e. given particularity, by appeal to the authority of the philologians; in other words, we find instances of the pattern in specific histories. These "confirm" the pattern and thereby establish that it contains laws. Thus the philologians give their authority "the sanction of truth", i.e. show them to be instances of historical laws.

In the deductive account one can thus find a function for the various elements involved in the rapprochement of philosophy and philology, in which the essence of "The New Science" is said to lie. One cannot do this in the case of the abstraction or purely inductive account. This factor therefore lends considerably more support to the former view than to the latter.

An important difference between the two accounts would be that from their very nature one would expect something more like a unified pattern or system of laws to result from the successful implementation of the deductive account and laws rather more independent of one another from the abstraction account. A better understanding of Vico's views in this respect will be afforded by a consideration of the last two general philosophical elements. These throw

light on how the subject matter of "The New Science" is to be construed if it is to be susceptible of the proposed (problematic) treatment. Conversely they also throw light on the nature of the treatment itself.

CHAPTER VI

The Nature of Human Institutions

Element XIV states that "the nature of things is nothing but their coming into being at certain times and with certain modifications. Whenever the time and modification is thus and so, such and not otherwise are the things that come into being".[1]

Element XV continues: "The inseparable properties of things must be due to the modification or mode with which they are born. By these properties we may therefore tell that the nature or birth was thus and not otherwise".[2]

Before attempting to discuss the nature of the philosophical points embodied in these elements, we must try to explicate their meaning. We may start by recalling that when Vico refers to "things" he is thinking of "human things", that is, types of social activities and ways of behaving, in short, human institutions in the broad sense. In Element XIV he is therefore asserting that the nature of human institutions is identical with the time at which, and the modification or mode with which, they arise. He introduces this intimate connection by asserting first that whenever a certain time and modification or mode obtains then and only then can a certain institution arise. Time and modification are thus presented as the sufficient and necessary conditions for human institutions.

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[1] N.S. 147. [2] N.S. 148.

In Element XV, this intimate relation is re-emphasised. Here we are told that if we know what properties or characteristics an institution has we can tell under what conditions it came into being, for its "inseparable" properties must be due to its modifications or modes. The effect of the two elements taken together is thus to assert that given the nature of the institution we can tell at what time and with what modifications it arose, while given the time at which, and the modifications with which, it arose we can tell its nature.

On the face of it Vico seems to be making the mistake of conflating a logical with a genetic account. For it is clear that when he talks of "the nature of things"[1] he is referring to their "inseparable properties".[2] This is supported by the fact that, as we have seen, he is trying to give an account of their necessary and sufficient conditions. On the other hand, when he talks of "the times" in which they are born he appears to be talking of dateable states of affairs, and hence of contingent facts. But since there is no contradiction in the supposition that a certain institution might have arisen at either of two different dateable times, which on Vico's account ought to be impossible, he would seem to be conflating the two types of account.

To see that this is not what Vico is doing we must look more closely at some of the key concepts involved, bearing in mind the context of these particular elements - in particular that they have been brought forward in close proximity to a discussion of "the common sense of men".

We must begin by considering what Vico means by "the times" and "the modifications or modes", asking first what he intends by the latter. His meaning here is very obscure. The terms he uses are 'guise' in Element XIV and 'modificazione o guisa' in Element XV. The Italian 'guisa' is unfortunately ambiguous,

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[1] N.S. 147. [2] N.S. 148.

having the meanings of 'fashion' or 'guise' which are adopted respectively in the two editions of the translation by Bergin and Fisch, or 'mode' or 'method'. On the other hand, in Element XV we are given 'guisa' and 'modificazione' as alternatives in such a way that they might be intended as synonyms. It is therefore necessary to seek one of the meanings of 'guisa' which might plausibly be looked upon as a synonym for 'modificazione'.

Here we are helped if we recall that one of our purposes in investigating these axioms was to discover what sort of thing Vico was thinking of when, in his basic epistemological principle, he referred to "the modifications of our own human mind".[1] If we may conjecture that these are the same as the "modifications" referred to in the fifteenth element then we may take the latter term to be short for "modifications of our own human mind". What we therefore require is a rendering of 'guisa' in which the latter might plausibly be substituted for 'modifications' in the above phrase. Here the word 'mode' seems most appropriate in that philosophical sense in which it has traditionally been related to the notion of 'substance', in which sense the distinctions have often been related to the notion of the mind and its various qualities.[2]

Too much must not be put upon this line of argument. It provides us with no more than a clue with which to look for Vico's meaning, for the notion of a 'mode' or 'modification' is far from unambiguous. At the same time it does justify us in looking for these modes or modifications among the sorts of ways in which the human mind works.

In this case the obvious place in which to look for these modifications

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[1] N.S. 331.

[2] Cf. Descartes' "Principles of Philosophy", principles XI and XXXII.

is in the judgments of the common sense of men, with which Vico has just been dealing. As we have seen, the common sense of men determines men's choice by seeing certain things to be either necessary or useful,[1] i.e. social aims and purposes are determined by men's conception of what is socially necessary or useful. The "certain modes", or modifications, may therefore be taken to be certain ways of thinking, the needs, utilities, purposes and aims which explain why certain institutions have been created.

Adopting this preliminary reading we might put Vico's suggestion thus. The nature of human institutions is to be found in their rationale, that is, in those needs and utilities the satisfaction and securing of which is aimed at in their adoption. Their nature, in other words, cannot be explicated or understood, except in terms of the specific human and social context in which they arose and those human and social needs they were thought to fulfill.

This may still seem rather tenuous and unconvincing. What, after all, is one to make of the notion of "the time" of their arising? This surely implies a dateable event and, as suggested above, it is only a contingent matter that an event should occur on one day rather than another. How can such a contingent factor be brought into an account of the "inseparable", and therefore necessary, features of an institution?

These difficulties vanish if one reapplies oneself to the context of Vico's remarks. He is talking of institutions in the broadest possible sense, that is, not merely as formal organisations for the achievement of certain specific ends (as in the case of a political institution such as a monarchy) but also as accepted habits of social behaviour and accepted modes of social relationship; and he is making it a necessary feature of these that they rest

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[1] N.S. 141.

upon widely held beliefs that what they achieve ought to be achieved. Now it makes no sense to try to put a specific date on the arising of such beliefs. They are rather beliefs which tend to arise over a certain length of time. In this sense they are best thought of as dispositions. Therefore when Vico talks of "the times" in which institutions arise, he is not thinking so much of a specific, dateable event as of a period of time over which developed the notion of the desirability of such an institution.

For an example to corroborate this we have not far to look. In Element XIX Vico briefly sets forth his account of the Laws of The Twelve Tables. It reads: "If the Laws of the Twelve Tables were customs of the peoples of Latium, originating in the age of Saturn, remaining unwritten elsewhere (in Latium) but set down by the Romans in bronze and guarded with religious care by Roman jurisprudence, then this Law is a great witness of the ancient natural law of the nations of Latium".[1] Here it is quite clear that one sort of institution with which Vico is concerned is a customary code of conduct. He is not concerned about dating it so much as with locating it in an era ("the age of Saturn") in which it arose. It is in any case obvious that a custom is, by definition, a mode of conduct whose adoption comes about gradually, not something whose adoption can ever be the result of a single dateable event. In fact, here and elsewhere Vico plays down the importance of the writing down of the Laws of the Twelve Tables, which would be such a dateable event, and treats the latter as important only in the sense that through this writing down present historians are in possession of a source by which they can recover what they really want: the customs and common sense wisdom of the nations of ancient

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[1] N.S. 154.

Latium.

But even the sense of "times" as periods of time, though a part of what Vico means, does not give us his full sense. The first part of Element XIV stated that "the nature of things is nothing but their coming into being at certain times and with certain modes". We have argued that part of the sense of this is that the nature of an institution is necessarily related to its rationale. We cannot therefore avoid the conclusion that its nature is also necessarily related to the times in which it arose. We must now ask ourselves: why should it be the case that an institution which cannot be understood without reference to its rationale also cannot be understood without reference to its "times"? Put this way we can see that one possible answer would be to claim that "times" and rationale are themselves necessarily connected. This provides the clue needed and introduces one of Vico's greatest insights - the sense of the importance of what Sir Isaiah Berlin has called "historical perspective".

We have already seen that it is with the lack of this that Vico reproaches other historians and philosophers when he nominates the two conceits as unacceptable features of their work.[1] For, at least in the case of the conceit of scholars, their mistake has been to attribute to former peoples beliefs and conceptions which it was impossible for them to have understood. The presupposition of this kind of charge, which occurs very frequently in "The New Science", is that at certain times people are able to understand and hold certain conceptions and beliefs and at others they are not.

If we accept Vico's claim here the consequence is that, in accusing

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[1] N.S. 123 and 125.

some historian of attributing to some people or nation a conception they could not have had at the time, he is in effect asserting that they were not at the stage of development necessary for such a conception.[1] And if one were to enquire what sort of development was here in question it would seem that it would be that of the various ideas, concepts and conceptual schemes necessary to, or involved in, the performance of certain kinds of activities. Thus Vico's criticism implies that there is such a thing as the development of ideas.

In Elements XIV and XV Vico is connecting the properties of institutions with their rationale and their rationale with their "times" by arguing that certain properties can only exist at certain times and then must exist. Clearly the sense of "times" appropriate to this claim is that which we have just uncovered, in which "the time" of an institution refers to its place in a necessary order of development. For only if we are willing to accept that there is a necessary order attached to the development of ideas can we rule out the possibility of certain conceptions and ideas arising at certain stages of history or, conversely, argue that some must obtain at certain stages.

It is now possible to explicate more fully the claims embodied in the two axioms here being considered. The first claim asserts that there is a necessary connection between an institution and certain common sense judgments, i.e. certain social aims and purposes. Vico sees the relation between the two as so intimate that he is willing to assert that the presence of either necessitates that of the other. The effect of this is to break down any suggestion that we are dealing with two types of entity, common sense wisdom and human institutions. What we are dealing with may rather be thought of as a

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[1] N.S. 329 presents a convenient example of this.

complex situation in which we may distinguish, but not isolate, two facets. It follows that the subject matter of history, i.e. human institutions, cannot be fully described without reference not only to the sorts of things people have done but also to the kinds of needs, purposes and, in general, final ends which are a necessary part of different kinds of human activity. Ordinarily one might tend to think of the historian as being concerned with two distinct things, explanation and description, i.e. with giving an account of what happened and why it happened. The effect of Vico's thesis is to deny this and to allege that description and explanation go together in history because the facts with which the historian deals are complex.

Vico's second claim asserts that certain ideas and therefore certain institutions can arise only at certain "times", i.e. at certain stages in the order of development of human ideas and institutions, and then must arise. Such a conception can only be maintained if we are willing to hold that there is a necessary temporal order attached to the stages of development of the different kinds of human activity, i.e. if we are willing to argue that the earlier stages of such an order of development provide the necessary and sufficient conditions of the later. There is no doubt that Vico was fully aware that this was what was involved in his notion of a pattern.[1] It is one of the central conceptions behind his idea of "an ideal eternal history traversed in time by the history of every nation in its rise, progress, maturity, decline and fall".[1]

We take this second thesis to be equivalent to the assertion that institutions are necessarily historical. The understanding of the nature of any institution involves an understanding of those reasons why an institution of

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[1] Cf. N.S. 348 and 349.

that type could and must occur in one type of social context and at one stage of historical development and not in any other.

This conclusion has an important bearing upon the interpretation of Element XIII and its corollaries. Vico is now saying that not only must we look for the necessary and sufficient conditions of institutions in the overall social context of human needs and aims but we must look upon these conditions as being themselves historically conditioned. Clearly an account of all the relevant conditioning factors must be found in "the"ideal eternal history".

It is difficult to see how this requirement could be assured in an "ideal eternal history" derived in accordance with the abstraction account. For the latter offers no guarantee that its laws are not derived from unhistorical accounts, for example of the kind against which Vico is always protesting. It is therefore possible that,although correctly derived, they will not include any account of those historical conditioning factors which are necessary to the understanding of institutions.[1]

No such difficulty need be encountered on the deductive account. Here our very understanding of the histories which are to support our claim to have discovered laws will be conditioned by the deductive model and the latter can be constructed in accordance with the necessity to allow for the historical nature of the conditioning factors.

These considerations do not suffice to establish that the correct way to take Element XIII is in accordance with the deductive as against the abstraction account. They do, however, show that Vico is still vitally concerned with the question how history should be written[2]; and they suggest that it would be

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[1]This point is expanded in Chapter X below.

[2]This confirms what was established in Chapter III above.

odd that such a concern should allow Vico to adopt a method of establishing the laws of the development of human institutions in which, as in the abtraction account, no guarantee is offered that proper weight will be placed upon the necessarily historical nature of the conditioning factors.

CHAPTER VII

The Idea of a Mental Dictionary

The idea of a mental dictionary is introduced by Vico in the corollary to Element XIII. This is an important conception in Vico's science and it is necessary to try to understand exactly how it functions.

According to the deductive account of Vico's enterprise, which I am advocating, the suggestions in the corollary to Element XIII are to be taken in the following way. There is a necessary connection between social needs and utilities and "the natural law of nations". We can find the laws which govern the development of these if we can find a sequence or pattern for both which is instantiated in all national histories. We can know that such universal instantiation is achieved when we find a pattern which provides a "mental dictionary" suitable for understanding the history of all languages. Finally "by means of this dictionary .... the ideal eternal history is conceived which gives us the history in time of all nations". In this account the ability of some deductive pattern to provide a "mental dictionary" suitable to understanding all languages, and thence all actual histories, is the criterion which establishes it as the "ideal eternal history".

The first step in this sequence of thought is the suggestion that social needs and utilities determine the natural law of nations. We have already seen that they determine the character of institutions. It is necessary to see how these claims connect with each other.

In understanding the claim that these social factors determine the natural law of nations we must be careful not to misinterpret the notion of the natural

law of nations. Vico's views about this are expressed in the more specific axioms CIV to CXIV. In the last of these axioms Vico discusses the term 'natural law' in the sense in which he does not intend to use it. This is the sense in which it has been used by the natural law theorists, in particular by Grotius, Selden and Pufendorf, to mean a system of legal rights based upon the notion of a perfect equity accessible throughout all history to all societies by means of men's ability to use their reason.[1] The substance of Vico's objection to this conception is implicit in his remark that it would seem odd that this should be so and yet it should take a considerable time in a nation's history ("two thousand years", by Vico's method of counting) before philosophers should appear who were capable of explicating the nature of these rational laws. Clearly this is another case of the conceit of scholars and of the wholly unhistorical view against which Vico is protesting.

The alternative sense, in which Vico does intend to use the phrase, is partly expressed in Element CV. "The natural law" Vico claims, "is coeval with the customs of the nations, conforming one with another in virtue of a common human sense, without any reflection and without one nation following the example of another".[2] It is clear that there is here a very close connection between custom and natural law and it might look as though natural law is just a particular type of custom backed by sanctions. This is suggested by an earlier remark of Vico's, in which he says: "In the first place, the natural law of nations was ordained by custom (which.... commands us by pleasure like a king) and not by law (which.... commands us by force like a tyrant). For it began in human customs springing from the common nature of all nations (which is the proper subject of our Science) and it preserves human society".[3] Here the notion of sanctions appears, these being pleasure and force, which might be looked upon as internal

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[1] N.S. 329. [2] N.S. 311. [3] N.S. 309.

and external sanctions. Vico seems to identify law with custom when the sanction is internal, and when he is referring to early societies. He distinguishes them in the case of later societies in which the sanction is external.

But the differences are less important than the similarities and lie only in the nature of the sanctions. Where the sanction is the same Vico refuses to distinguish them.

The important similarity lies in the fact that they are identically related to the "common human sense". In other words they equally represent modes of conduct determined by social needs and utilities and social pressures which aim at securing these. They differ in degree and not in kind.

Thus when Vico asserts in the corollary to Element XIII that the common sense dictates or determines the natural law he intends the latter to be taken in a very general sense as referring to the various kinds of human custom and activity taken as a system, sometimes externally enforced and sometimes not. The important point here is that they should be customs or modes of activity whose nature is sufficiently explained by the general character of the social and historical context in which they arise. I have taken these to be institutions, a notion which embraces both customary and legally enforced kinds of activity. In the light of what Vico has said it is clear that for him the natural law is the law which is natural to a particular type of society at a particular stage of development. Instead of being a matter of eternal and unchanging truth, as it is in the hands of the natural law theorists, it is a law which is constantly altering and developing, though not in such a way as to preclude the possibility of finding the pattern of its alteration.

The next step in Vico's argument is to suggest that when we understand the underlying unity in the natural law of all nations we can reach a "mental dictionary for assigning origins to all the divers articulated languages". I

shall consider this notion by looking at what Vico has to say about it in another of the general elements (XXII) and in some of the more specific elements (LXIII to LXV).

In Element XXII Vico writes:

> "There must in the nature of human things be a mental language common to all nations, which uniformly grasps the substance of things feasible in human social life, and expresses it with as many diverse modifications as these things have diverse aspects. A proof of this is afforded by proverbs or maxims of vulgar wisdom, in which substantially the same meanings find as many diverse expressions as there are notions ancient and modern."[1]

What Vico means by "a mental language" here is revealed by the example given in the last sentence, in which he talks of "the same meanings" found in the diverse expressions. The distinction is between the words or expressions of a language and the meaning of those words or expressions. Vico is asserting that though each nation has its own system of words and expressions, its own verbal language, the meanings contained in these different verbal languages are the same. In other words, different nations have different verbal languages but identical conceptual schemes.

The subject matter of this mental language is said to be "the substance of things feasible in human social life", a view which should not at this point be surprising since, as we have seen, it is with "human needs or utilities"[2] that the common sense is concerned. In so far as there is a common sense it operates only in respect of those "things possible in human social life".

Vico's language in this axiom might lead us to think that this is intended as some sort of a priori proposition; this at least might be inferred from his suggestion that there "must" be such a mental language. But his presentation of "a proof" and the nature of the proof shows that this is not so. For the latter

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[1] N.S. 161. [2] N.S. 141.

is obtained by establishing the identity of meaning in the proverbs of different nations. Empirical confirmation is thus the method of proof and the axiom itself, that there "must .... be a mental language common to all nations", is a conclusion of an argument rather than an a priori truth.

It can be seen that in presenting this somewhat mysterious axiom Vico is doing no more than apply the rule embodied in Element XIII to the subject matter of the history of human purposes and aims. What he is saying is if we can establish a single pattern to the sequence of human needs, purposes, aims, institutions and, more generally, to the conceptual background of these as confirmed by the histories of the different nations, we are entitled to claim that we have discovered the laws of the development of such conceptual schemes.

Vico next advances, in the corollary of Element XXII, to the assertion that "This common mental language is proper to our Science, by whose light linguistic scholars will be enabled to construct a mental vocabulary common to all the various articulate languages living and dead."[1] This is a reference to that "mental dictionary for assigning origins to all the diverse articulated languages" which was introduced in the corollary to Element XIII. We must note the suggestion that, by means of it, we can assign "origins to all the divers articulated languages". Thus it is not only the case that we can discover conceptual schemes common to all nations but we can find out how they arose. To find out how Vico conceives this possibility we must turn to those "more specific" axioms in which it is explained.

One of the principles of such an etymology is expressed in Element LXIII. Here Vico writes:

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[1] N.S. 162.

"The human mind is naturally inclined by the senses to see itself externally in the body, and only with great difficulty does it come to attend to itself by means of reflection.

"This axiom gives us the universal principle of etymology in all languages: words are carried over from the bodies and from the properties of bodies to express the things of the mind and spirit."[1]

Though the axiom itself may be obscure, there is no doubt at all about Vico's intention as regards the etymology of languages. This will consist in a genetic account in which a connection will be traced between words which come to have mental and spiritual meanings and the same, or very similar, words which earlier have a physical meaning.

This is a very general principle and something much more specific is required if it is to be of help for the task in hand. In particular, what is needed is some principle which will help to establish the order of development of the ideas expressed in words. Vico gives this in his next two elements.

The main principle is stated in Element LXIV: "The order of ideas must follow the order of things."[2] Again, we must remember that by "things" Vico means human institutions and types of social activity, though this alone is not enough to show us how to understand the axiom. We require to know also the nature of the relation between the order of ideas and the order of things. Does Vico mean to express a genetic relationship between ideas and activities such as, perhaps, would be contained in the suggestion that men at first are creatures of exclusively practical interests, who later turn to thinking and reasoning? Such a suggestion might seem plausible in view of the fact that, as we shall see, Vico does give an account of history in which each historical unit, the nation, goes through a series of stages of development in the course of which there is a transition from an unreflective and superstitious mentality

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[1] N.S. 236 and 237. [2] N.S. 238.

to one capable of grasping the rationale of human activity.

However, that this is not what Vico means is shown by the fact that, as we have seen, institutions ("things") are never without a rationale, that is, they are always such that they can never be fully described without reference to general social needs and aims. It follows that there is no stage at which human activity can be described without recourse to the notion of its containing an ineradicable element of "idea" in it. Therefore Vico cannot mean by this principle to indicate a distinction between two phases of man's history, a thinking and an unthinking phase.

His meaning can best be clarified if we remember that Vico is now trying to arrive at the principles of etymology, through which what he wants to get at is the history of the meanings of words, "the ideas" expressed in them. He must therefore first of all outline the principles of those factors which determine the meanings of words. Thus what he is here asserting is that "the ideas" which are later expressed in words arise first in the over-all context of the various kinds of social activities, i.e. of human, social institutions. Read thus, Vico is doing no more than reassert, in the context of his discussion of etymology, his conception of the nature of human social activity as being essentially end-directed and purposive. The sort of idea with which such an etymological dictionary would concern itself would be the sort of idea which is a necessary feature of human social activity. Therefore its order of development and the principles of its history are logically subsequent to those principles which govern the order of development of the whole system of human institutions.

This again is a very broad reading of the axiom. To confirm it we must turn to Element LXV which follows it, paying particular attention to the example given in its corollary.

The element itself asserts: "This was the order of human things: first the forests, after that the huts, thence the villages, next the cities and finally the academies."[1] In the corollary Vico continues: "This axiom is a great principle of etymology, for this sequence of human things sets the pattern for the histories of words in the various native languages. Thus we observe in the Latin language that almost the whole corpus of its words have sylvan or rustic origins. For example, "lex". First it must have meant "collection of acorns". Thence we believe is derived "ilex", as it were "illex", "the oak" (as certainly "aquilex" is the "collector of waters"); for the oak produces the acorns by which the swine are drawn together. "Lex" was next "a collection of vegetables", from which the latter were called "legumina". Later on, at a time when vulgar letters had not yet been invented for writing down the laws, "lex" by a necessity of civil nature must have meant "a collection of citizens" or the public parliament, so that the presence of the people was the law that solemnised the wills that were made "colatis comitiis", in the presence of the assembled "comitia". Finally, collecting letters, and making as it were a sheaf of them in each word, was called "legere", reading".[2]

Here Vico states first the sequence of "human things", in very general descriptive terms. These are the stages of life in a rural setting, life in a setting of considerable simplicity but with a domestic basis, life based on a communal village organisation, life based upon a civic organisation and finally life based upon a yet more refined type of civic organisation. The mode of classification thus presents a temporal sequence of different systems of human institutions, different ways of life. We must note particularly Vico's claim that this sequence "sets the pattern for the histories of words" in the various languages.

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[1] N.S. 239. [2] N.S. 240.

In his example, Vico then goes on to give an account of the different meanings which the word "lex" has had, each meaning being shown to be appropriate to its usage in the context of a certain system of institutions or social setting. Thus where men are living the way of life appropriate to a rural setting, the meaning of the word is to be sought in the sort of activity in which they would have to indulge. But where they have developed and live in cities, its meaning will have been modified in order to be applicable in the context of their new sorts of activities.

From this we see that the history of the meanings of words, "follows", i.e. is determined by, the wider context of the history of society. We may put Vico's point in a more general way by saying that words are used in the context of human ideas, and ideas in the context of the sorts of things men do.

This must not be taken to suggest any distinction in principle between languages and institutions. Language is itself an institution just as much as, say, a certain form of landholding. But it arises in the context of the total pattern of man's way of life and its history must therefore reflect its relationship to this wider context.

Yet the point of Vico's remarks is not obvious. Nor does it become so until we ask the question: how does this principle relate to the construction of true history? We must remember that the historian very often has nothing but linguistic evidence to go on. What Vico is presenting is thus a philosophical thesis about the nature and function of language and the context in which it operates which will enable the historian to know how to use the linguistic evidence in his task of establishing the history of ideas and institutions.

Even now the difficulties of these passages are not finished. For what is one to say of the sequence of different systems of institutions which Vico adduces? Is this the product of some a priori intuition, knowledge of which precedes historical interpretation? The dogmatic way in which Vico simply asserts it might suggest so. Yet there is another more plausible view and this is the one already suggested, that it represents a sociological hypothesis taken by Vico to be confirmed by the historical investigations he carries out in "The New Science", most particularly by his etymological investigations; thus the sequence of different social systems is part of the deductive model Vico is proposing.

This may not seem to be supported by the first sentence of the corollary to Element LXV. There Vico claims: "This axiom is a great principle of etymology, for this sequence of human things sets the pattern for the histories of words in the various native languages". One might read this remark as though it suggested that the historian had first to know the pattern of the history of institutions before he could discover the pattern of the history of words. But one might also read it as a combination of two assertions. First, as suggested above it claims that the pattern of human institutions provides the context in which language arises and functions. This is a philosophical principle. The actual sequence of institutions it refers to, however, forms part of a sociological hypothesis, to be "confirmed" by providing the principles for a correct etymology. On this interpretation construction of the pattern of institutions would not require some sort of a priori intuition. What would be required would be first of all philosophical insight into the relationship between institutions and language, then the construction of a sociological hypothesis stating a specific sequence of institutions and finally the ability

to confirm this by the construction and testing of a correct etymology in accordance with these theoretical insights.

We may again ask the question: how would we explain all this if we assumed that the "ideal eternal history" was constructed on an inductive basis? The social scientist, or the historian upon whom in the first instance he would have to rely for his material, often has nothing but linguistic evidence to go upon. The accurate interpretation of the latter is impossible without principles incorporating the social and historical factors which determine the development of language. If the "ideal eternal history" is construed to be nothing more than a pattern to be abstracted from the various histories then it would seem that Vico is offering no solution to the problem, with which he is evidently very concerned, of how to arrive at the principles which underlie the writing of correct history, for he would be failing to suggest how we get at these principles. The passages we have just discussed make it quite clear that he is trying to suggest (sociological) principles which underlie the writing of all history and the interpretation of all historical evidence. They thus strengthen the suggestion that the "ideal eternal history" which embodies these suggestions be thought of, in the first instance at least, as a deductive model. If and when it is confirmed we might think of it as containing established laws.

CHAPTER VIII

Historical Evidence

The elements so far discussed are those "which will serve for considering this world of nations in its eternal idea".[1] The notion of an "ideal eternal history" has been introduced and we have some idea how it is to be confirmed. The notion of confirmation has, however, only been most generally touched upon by Vico and in the concluding general elements he concerns himself with some rather more direct remarks about the nature of the historical material relevant to the instantiation of the proposed model in the various actual histories. He does this in Elements XVI to XXII which, he says, "will give us the foundations of the certain" and "by whose use we shall be able to see in fact this world of nations which we have studied in idea".[1]

The wording here is important. Vico does not say that this next set of general elements will give us the facts which we have so far studied in idea. Nor could he possibly mean this for we have not so far studied a specific pattern of history which could in any way be related to historical facts. What we have been given is the idea of such a pattern. We must therefore expect the latter to be related to a set of philosophical suggestions as to how this idea is to be confirmed. This concluding set of general elements does not present us with a confirmation of an "ideal eternal history" but with indications of how to set about achieving such a confirmation i.e. how we are to set about showing

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[1] N.S. 163.

the various histories to be instances of a pattern and what evidence is relevant to this task.

Element XVI states: "Vulgar traditions must have public grounds of truth, by virtue of which they came into being and were preserved by entire peoples over long periods of time".[1] In a corollary Vico adds: "It will be a great labour of this Science to recover these grounds of truth - truth which, in the passage of years and the changes in languages and customs, has come down to us enveloped in falsehood."[2]

Vico does not state here what sorts of traditions he has in mind but his own later use of tales about the Trojan War or about Romulus and Remus show that he is thinking of traditions held by a nation about its own past history. The main claim he is making here is that what later becomes a (partially false) tradition must initially have been founded on fact. That this is how to take his claim can be confirmed by recalling Element I which is said to explain the fact that "rumour grows in its course" but "is deflated by the presence (of the thing itself)".[3]

In effect the element presents a plea for the critical usage by historians of national traditions. In their later forms these traditions cannot be accepted; but if we know the principles by which they have been changed and falsified (and it will be part of the work of the "ideal eternal history" to provide these) we shall be able to trace the course of these changes and so recover the original truths represented. Hence although a tradition may

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[1] N.S. 149. [2] N.S. 150. [3] N.S. 120 and 121.

perhaps only be committed to writing many centuries after the events it purports to relate and although by then it may have ceased to relate the truth of what happened, nevertheless the tradition, in that form in which it is finally accessible to the historian, can still be of historical value.

Element ~~VII~~ XVII states that "the vulgar tongues should be the most weighty witnesses concerning those ancient customs of the peoples that were in use at the time the languages were formed".[1] The presupposition of this element is, as has been mentioned, that language is one institution among others and so shares their characteristic of being created to fulfil human necessities and utilities. We can therefore use it to confirm our account of those other customs and institutions with which it is related for this purpose.

Vico's suggestion that language is a "witness" is important here. A witness is not an authority but some person or thing which is used to confirm or refute an account - in this case the model given in the shape of the "ideal eternal history".

For the historian language is especially important for it is one of the few human activities of which, through writing, a permanent record has been left. It is therefore of special value in the recovery of those other customs and institutions in which the historian is interested. Vico is suggesting that it does this not merely by describing them, for then its value would be limited to those comparatively few cases in which people have described in writing the social or political scene; it helps also by revealing them incidentally for in language is expressed those social ideas and conceptions which are a

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[1] N.S. 151.

necessary feature of the different kinds of human activity and institution.

Element XVIII is similarly concerned with the use of the study of language in history. It states: "A language of an ancient nation which has maintained itself as the dominant tongue throughout its development should be a great witness to the customs of the early days of the world."[1] Vico adds that this axiom entitles us to use both the Latin and the German languages to prove the natural law of nations.

The suggestion that the German language will be of use in this as well as the Latin language shows that Vico is not here adducing some new principle to distinguish the use of classical languages from that of the "vulgar" languages of which he has so far been speaking. He is still talking of "vulgar" language in the sense of popular or spoken language.

What Vico is drawing attention to in this new element is the importance of those languages which have remained in use throughout the development of a nation i.e. in those cases where the natural development of the language has not been affected by such external factors as conquest from abroad.[2] In these cases, and where the nation concerned was an ancient nation, we are in a position to confirm accounts of early world history. The presupposition here is exactly that of the previous element.

The final elements in this section need not detain us. They state that the "Laws of the Twelve Tables" must be used, in accordance with the above recommendations, as evidence for the customs of the peoples of Latium[3]; and the poems of Homer, which are "civil histories of ancient Greek customs", as evidence for the customs and natural law of Greece.[4] The latter claim represents

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[1] N.S. 152.

[2] cf "Commento Storico Alla Seconda Scienze Nuova" by F. Nicolini, Vol. I pp 77 & 78.

[3] N.S. 154. [4] N.S. 156.

Vico's conclusion concerning the Homeric poems, reached by treating them, in accordance with the recommendation of Element XVI, as vulgar traditions whose original meanings, although obscured by changes in language and custom, can be recovered because the sequence of these changes can itself be charted.

These two elements are general not in the sense that they are necessary to any attempt whatsoever to confirm an "ideal eternal history" but only in the sense that they represent two important realms of evidence pertaining to Vico's own attempt to do so.

Element XXI likewise need not detain us. It contains arguments to show why the rate of succession of the different phases of the "ideal eternal history" was quicker, if measured in terms of years, in the case of the history of Greece than that of Rome.[1] This again can be treated as a general element only in the sense that such a claim underlies Vico's use of Greek and Roman historical evidence in his attempt to confirm his account of the "ideal eternal history". It is not general in the sense of underlying any such attempt whatsoever.

Vico's suggestions in this second set of general elements are of great importance in their bearing upon historical practice, for he is telling historians what they should do and, later, giving good examples of how they should do it. An instance of this was provided by his account of the word "lex" which we have already discussed.[2] In all this he is showing outstanding originality.

Yet this is not the limit of his achievement. He is not only making original recommendations to historians as to how they should proceed, he is also putting forward a conception of the relation between institutions, ideas and languages which provides a sound philosophical ground for his recommendations. If it is true that a contemporary historian once he had acknowledged the originality of Vico's recommendations might have little new to learn from them,

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[1] N.S. 158. [2] See Chapter VII above.

it is also true that there is still much of value to be derived from Vico's remarks about the theoretical basis of historical procedure.

In the above account I have suggested that Vico thinks of evidence as having a primarily corroborative function. This must not be taken in too narrow a way. We know that Vico suggests that historical research will "confirm" the reasonings of the philosopher. I have taken this to mean that it will confirm a deductive model. But we must note that the deductive model will be of a very general nature. It is not to be assumed that the histories which will confirm this will be confined to the same very general scale. All that is requisite is that the general principles supplied by the deductive model should be sufficient for the correct interpretation of the historical evidence.

We may take the example mentioned in the last chapter to illustrate this. The "order of human things" given by Vico was "first the forests, after that the huts, thence the villages, next the cities and finally the academies".[1] This is a general principle embodied in the "ideal eternal history". Vico then used this sequence to provide the principle necessary for a correct account of the history of the word "lex". The same sequence will, of course, provide the principle necessary for a correct account of many different words. If it can do this the principle is confirmed. It is thus clear that the histories which confirm it are at a much more specific level of detail than the principle itself. There is therefore no question of the philosopher who provides the general deductive model in any way usurping the function of empirical investigation which belongs properly to the historian. He simply provides the general principles necessary for this investigation.

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[1] N.S. 239.

In relation to the above example it is worth making one further point. The "order of human things" given by Vico represents the order appropriate to the complete life-cycle of a nation. It is therefore the order appropriate to the interpretation of a language which, as is suggested in Element XVIII, "has maintained itself as the dominant tongue throughout its development". I have taken this to mean that it is appropriate to the language of a nation whose development has not been affected by factors such as foreign conquest, which would have the consequence of introducing into the language terms not to be explained by this general principle. If this is correct Vico might be expected to have thought about the principles requisite to explain words of foreign origin. In fact mention is made of such a principle, based upon an attempt by Vico to explain at what time in the life-cycle of a nation its inhabitants might have recourse to foreign conquest.[1] A principle which explained this would again provide the historian with the key to the understanding of those terms which were introduced into a language as a result of conquest by some other nation.

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[1] The principle is given in Elements C to CII and Vico's explanation of it in a corollary. See N.S. 304 and 305.

CHAPTER IX

The Deductive Method

There occurs in "The New Science" a number of other sections in which Vico makes some general remarks about the nature of his enterprise. None of these are as full as the "Elements" and they therefore cannot be substituted for the latter. But they can help to throw some additional light on what Vico is trying to do and it will be useful briefly to discuss the most important of these sections, Part IV of Book I, which Vico entitles "Method".

Unfortunately this is one of the most obscure parts of "The New Science". The difficulty of understanding it arises not only from the ever-present problem of Vico's terminology but also from the fact that the discussion of method is not at all clearly distinguished from some very important remarks Vico makes about the nature of the proofs which are relevant to "The New Science".[1] Nevertheless Vico does manage to commence with an account of the method to be followed[2] and it is in this context that the following sequence of argument is to be found.

The section opens with the claim that methodologically the enquiry must go back to the earliest history of each nation and begin by tracing the action of divine providence.[3] Having made this point Vico so far digresses

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[1] These are discussed separately in Chapter XVI below.

[2] N.S. 338.

[3] N.S. 338 and 339.

from his intention of discussing method as to begin to trace this action for us.[1] This, he next claims, will afford a proof of divine providence.[2]

From here Vico proceeds to mention some "logical proofs". In tracing the action of divine providence "we reach those first beginnings beyond which it is vain curiosity to demand others earlier. We explain the particular ways in which they come into being, that is to say, their nature, the explanation of which is the distinguishing mark of science. And finally (these proofs) are confirmed by the eternal properties (the things) preserve, which could not be what they are if the things had not come into being just as they did in those particular times, places and fashions, which is to say with those particular natures, as we have set forth in two axioms".[3]

Vico is here reaffirming the claim made in two elements (XIV and XV) already considered.[4] In discussing these it was suggested that the factors which determined the nature of institutions were the social, economic and political needs and utilities of the various sections of society which were themselves to be taken to be historically conditioned. If this were correct we might expect Vico to suggest that the method by which the nature of institutions be reached should be through an account of the development of human ideas. He now writes:

"In search of these natures of human things our Science proceeds by a severe analysis of human thought about the human necessities or utilities of social life, which are the two perennial springs of the natural law of nations, as we have remarked in the axioms. In its second principal aspect our Science is therefore a history of human ideas ....."[5]

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[1] N.S. 340 and 341. [2] N.S. 343. [3] N.S. 346. [4] See Chapter VI above.
[5] N.S. 347.

Unfortunately, in trying to understand Vico's suggestion here we again run into the difficulty of his use of undefined technical terms. In this passage the key phrase is the "severe analysis of human thought about the human necessities or utilities", in which the notion of analysis[1] is introduced but not explained. What is worse it does not reappear in "The New Science" so there is no possibility of throwing light on it by a comparison of its various uses.

We might begin to try to understand Vico's meaning by asking what kinds of analysis could be relevant in the light of what sense we have so far made of Vico's theories. We have to consider the different meanings the notion of analysis would have in relation to the deductive account of Vico's theory and in relation to the abstraction account. If the abstraction account were correct then the most plausible way to take Vico's suggestion about analysis would be to treat it as a reference to some sort of comparative analysis of facts. But this would be to treat Vico as a sort of social scientist and there has so far been no real evidence that this view is probable.

On the deductive account what Vico's method would have to do would be to show how we can arrive at a model of the sequence and nature of human institutions via an account of the sequence of human ideas. If this were the correct way to take Vico the notion of analysis would be equivalent to that of deduction. In effect what Vico would be suggesting would be that, once we had established how divine providence could produce rudimentary social purposes and aims amongst earliest men, we could deduce the later sequence of purposes and aims which would develop from this starting point and from this construct a model of the general outlines of the development of man's

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[1] Vico's own term is "analisi".

institutions.

It has been a weakness of the deductive account so far that there has been in the elements no explicit mention of a deductive model. All that I have so far been able to show is that the elements make better sense if we assume that this is the sort of account Vico is trying to give than if we make what seems the only other plausible assumption. It would therefore be very useful corroboration for the deductive account if we could establish that by "analysis" Vico means deduction. Fortunately he now goes on to talk in terms which make it most probable that this is what he has in mind:

> "To determine the times and places for such a history, that is, when and where these human thoughts were born and thus to give it certainty by means of its own (so to speak) metaphysical chronology and geography, our Science applies a likewise metaphysical art of criticism with regard to the founders of these same nations ..... and the criterion our criticism employs, in accordance with an axiom stated above, is that taught by divine providence and common to all nations, namely the common sense of the human race, determined by the necessary harmony of human beings, in which all the beauty of the civil world consists".[1]

Vico is claiming that we can establish the order of development of human ideas ("metaphysical chronology") by means of an account of the development of social purposes and aims, the determining factors of which are human needs and utilities. The suggestion appears to be that by means of the determining principles which govern human aims we can deduce in the first instance what those aims will be and thence a general account of the development of human thought. If this were correct, part of what "The New Science" would provide would be an irreversible sequence of human purposes, ideas and institutions, while any actual history written in conformity with such a sequence would have to show not merely that one stage of history followed another but that it had to follow the other. That this is Vico's view is

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[1] N.S. 348.

confirmed by his next remark. He writes:

> "The decisive sort of proof in our Science is therefore this: that once these orders have been established by providence, the course of the affairs of the nations had to be, must now be and will have to be such as our Science demonstrates, even if infinite worlds were produced from time to time through eternity, which is certainly not the case".[1]

The quotation ~~from~~ for once speaks for itself. The notion of an irreversible sequence to human institutions and the various kinds of human activities ("the course of the affairs of the nations") is written into the "ideal eternal history". That this is to be ensured by the deductive nature of the model is confirmed by a further remark added by Vico:

> "Thus our Science proceeds exactly as does geometry, which, while it constructs out of its elements or contemplates the world of quantity, itself creates it; but with a reality greater in proportion to that of the orders having to do with human affairs, in which there are neither points, lines, surfaces or figures".

The bearing of this remark upon Vico's epistemological principle will be discussed later.[2] Here it is important to note only the suggestion of a parallel between the method of geometry and that by which the "ideal eternal history" is constructed. This lends added weight to the deductive account of the derivation of the latter.

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[1] N.S. 348. [2] See Chapter XVII below.

CHAPTER X

History and Sociology

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The claims Vico has so far put forward fall into two groups, the connection between which is not brought out with sufficient clarity in the general elements. I propose to conclude this preliminary survey of Vico's philosophical views with a summary and brief discussion of the two sets of claims before commencing an enquiry into his own account of the 'ideal eternal history' to discover what additional light it throws upon the theory as so far conceived.

Vico began his theoretical remarks with a plea that history should be put upon a proper critical foundation. He then argued that history could not be fully explained merely as the outcome of the doings of individual men considered purely as individuals. Some new category must be introduced and Vico's suggestion is that we think of the individual in his relationship to the over-all social structure, i.e. in his various social roles and capacities. By so doing we can introduce in the first place the notion of social, economic and political aims and purposes and, arising from these, social pressures and forces to explain the course of history. The aspect of the life of a nation which will thus be explained will be the history of its social structure, i.e. the rise, development and decline of the various kinds of institution, social relationships and social roles.

We must ask first why Vico thought that the consideration of the history of man under these various aspects could be relevant to the production of a science whereas the history of man considered solely as an individual could not. The answer to this is to be found in Vico's contention that we can know the causes or determinants of the general outlines of the history of society whereas we cannot with the same certainty know the causes of the history of individual behaviour. Therefore the former and not the latter can be relevant to the production of a new science.

This contention is plausible only if we can establish that the sorts of causes adduced by Vico are sufficient to determine the history of society and that the sort of explanation he wishes to rule out, i.e. explanation by recourse to individual actions the causes of which are ultimately unknowable to us, is irrelevant. It is important to point out here that it would only be fair to Vico to discuss this matter in relation to the kind of explanatory factors he adduces, rather than the actual factors (the "human necessities or utilities"), since at a later stage of "The New Science" he proceeds to expand his account of the actual factors involved.[1]

The first point to be made is that Vico's claim only applies to the general outline of history. He is certainly not claiming that to the explanation of no events whatsoever are personal, individual factors relevant. This was made quite clear by paragraph 1108 which allowed that men often acted for selfish reasons. But the general outline of changes in social structure is, on Vico's view, determined by factors other than individual wishes and desires.

It will be objected to Vico's position that these social factors with which he deals are abstractions: to talk of social purposes is ultimately to

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[1] Cf. N.S. 241. This is discussed in Chapter XI below.

talk of purposes held by individual men, and to talk of social pressures is ultimately to talk of pressures exerted by individual men.

There is no reason why Vico need be upset by such an objection. It is true that there is a sense in which social purposes and pressures are held and exerted by individual men, but the latter are in turn merely abstractions unless they are considered in their various roles and capacities. Vico could thus defend his claim on the general philosophical ground that all concepts are abstractions; they all describe aspects of things, never a unique, individual thing itself. Insofar as our descriptions approach individuality they do so by being made more precise or specific.

This would not entirely meet the objection. For though it might be admitted that one is getting nearer to an understanding of the individual when one considers him in his various social relationships it would still be contended that there is a difference between considering him as the individual he is in these relationships and considering him as a sort of anonymous occupier of roles which involve these relationships. Surely, it will be contended, it makes all the difference to the way the occupier of a certain institution will act in face of the various social pressures, that he is, say, intelligent rather than unintelligent, optimistic rather than pessimistic. And is this not what Vico is denying?

Put thus, the difference is no longer between a unique individual and some social abstraction, it **is** between two aspects under which the individual can be viewed. In one he is considered in relation to his various qualities of character, in the other in his social relationships. It would now be the former aspect which Vico is guilty of neglecting in his endeavours to do justice to the latter.

There is some force in this objection. We cannot tell how a man will act in any given social situation unless we know what kind of character he has. If Vico has no answer to this difficulty, I see no way in which his position could be preserved for it flies in the face of common knowledge to suggest that one's character makes no difference to what one does.

But Vico has an answer. It is one of the unfortunate features of the general elements that he fails to emphasise sufficiently the distinction between those kinds of factors in the social situation which will help determine one's choice and those other features of human nature which also play a part in determining it. When Vico talks of the social decision being determined by the "human needs or utilities" he seems to suggest that the latter are the sole determining factors. It will be shown later, however, that his doctrine of the different kinds of human nature, with their different kinds of motivation and different mental properties and tendencies, provides an answer to just this question. In effect what he argues is that at any stage of the historical evolution of a nation there is a dominant kind of human nature, a dominant set of ways of thinking, of tendencies and character traits. The general outline of social history is determined by what people with these mental characteristics will take to be the needs and utilities of the time in face of the various social pressures and forces which, through their social relationships, they can bring to bear upon one another.

It may be objected, however, that this reply still overlooks an obvious fact: that the abilities, dispositions and character of an Augustus or a Napoleon affect the general course of history in a different way from those of a mediaeval villein or a Roman client. Is Vico not committed to denying this obvious fact?

It is not obvious that Vico does deny this. He allows that there are certain stages in a nation's history when the presence of an individual such as Augustus will affect the general outline of the nation's history, within certain specifiable limits.[1] But these limits are themselves determined by the sorts of factors Vico has already introduced. Moreover, such occasions arise only at a few stages in the nation's history and, when they do, the fact that those particular qualities of character possessed by the individual should be able to have such an effect is something which itself requires explanation. This again is provided by Vico on the lines already mentioned. We require to know why the doings of an Augustus can have an important effect in history while those of a Charlemagne should scarcely outlive him; and to answer this we shall have to have recourse not to differences in the abilities of the two kinds of men but to the general nature of the nations concerned, i.e. to the predominant nature of the people, to the structure of the society and to the operative pressures and forces which preserve or destroy the achievements of the great.

I see no answer to Vico's position here. It is true that some contemporary historians still write as though history is to be explained by recourse to the actions of some important individuals. But this is merely question-begging and superficial unless they are prepared to explain what it is about the over-all historical context which allows the decisions of such individuals to have their effect. It is difficult to see how this can be done without recourse to factors, such as those of the underlying social structure and the pressures which are exerted and channelled through this, of the sort provided by Vico.

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[1] N.S. 1104 and 1105.

It may still be objected that these forces are "blind" and "impersonal" but it is difficult to see how this would have any effect upon Vico's position. His forces are not blind because the persons involved in exerting the pressure know what they are trying to do, even if they do not necessarily know that they are doing it in common with others and cannot perhaps see what will be the final outcome of it all. Nor are his forces impersonal because to consider a person in one of his roles rather than others, and to consider the pressures which he helps exert in one direction rather than those he exerts in others, is not to cease to think of him as a person. It is simply to concentrate on one or other aspects of his life and activities rather than some others.

(ii)

The second group of theories outlined in the general elements are concerned with the possibility of knowledge in relation to the history of human affairs. Vico takes knowledge to be concerned with that which is universal and necessary. If there is to be such knowledge in relation to human activity we shall find it by establishing a pattern to which the histories of all nations must conform; and we can claim to have done this if we can show that an identifiable sequence of institution and idea is instantiated in the histories of all nations independently of one another. Such instantiation would amount to the empirical confirmation which is necessary to establish laws.

The establishment of such laws would nowadays be taken to be the work of a sociologist. It is clear enough, whether we incline to the deductive account or the abstraction account of how to establish these laws, what the function of actual histories would be here. On the deductive view they would serve to confirm a theoretical model and give it the status of a set of laws. On the

abstraction view they would present the facts from which the social scientist would attempt to establish laws inductively.

What is perhaps still not clear is why Vico thought that the history which is to perform either of these functions must be of the sort he is advocating. The answer is, however, not difficult to see. A law gives an account of those kinds of things whose occurrence determines that of some other kind of thing. The sort of history Vico is advocating can claim to have a similar character, i.e. if history is written in the way Vico suggests one can claim to have shown the occurrence and development of an institution of a certain kind to be necessary and inevitable. But if we take history to be the outcome of the activities of individuals considered purely as the individuals they are, we can come to no knowledge of laws through it. For laws establish connections between kinds of things and it is just as a kind of person that this view of history refuses to consider the individuals with whom it deals.

This explains why Vico, although in the end he wants to establish sociological laws, felt it necessary to try to show that a certain kind of history independently satisfied the highest requirements one could demand of history. For it is useless to argue that the laws of history can be established by appeal to a certain kind of history if an opponent can reply that this kind of history is, for various reasons, intellectually unacceptable.

How is one to show that a certain kind of history is intellectually acceptable? Vico's reply is to offer a philosophical justification of the sort of history he is recommending, that is, in effect, to offer an account of the nature of the sorts of things which require to be explained and of those factors which are both sufficient and necessary to provide an explanation. It is difficult to see in what other way one would set about such a task. And,

as I have suggested above, it is difficult to see that the kind of history advocated by Vico is not soundly grounded.

(iii)

By far the most unsatisfactory part of the general elements is the highly ambiguous account Vico gives of the way in which we are to establish the sociological laws. I have considered two possible interpretations of Vico's remarks and have tried to show that on the whole more sense can be made of these if we take him to be advocating the deductive account than if we favour the abstraction account. It is worth while to say something further about this in the light of what has just been said concerning the relation of history and sociology and the need for an independent justification of the kind of history which is to be relevant to the task in hand.

It is one of the merits of Vico's conception of how history should be written that he puts great emphasis upon the requirement that the factors which are brought into historical accounts should be shown to be historically conditioned. He has complained constantly that other historians have failed to do this[1] and he has claimed that it is necessary to the understanding of any institution that we should be able to show a necessary relation between the form of the institution and the historically conditioned context of needs and aims in which alone it can occur.

If we take the view that the "ideal eternal history" consists of a set of laws arrived at inductively from material presented in various histories it is difficult to see how Vico can think he has provided any sort of guarantee that the factor of historical conditioning has been accorded its proper place.

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[1] See Chapter III above.

Indeed, it is difficult to see that he has provided any account at all of how we should introduce it into history. There would be nothing about the "ideal eternal history" if taken in this way which would secure this.

The difficulty arises because on the abstraction view the discovery and elucidation of the laws of history is, so to speak, a second-order process: one which presupposes the work of the historian and which therefore cannot in any way contribute to the correctness of the latter. If we suppose the social scientist to be looking for correlations between historical facts or ideas as he finds them in the works of various historians then, if something has gone wrong in the historical accounts, the pattern or set of laws arrived at by an analysis of these accounts will also be wrong. On this view we could only accept the pattern as correct if it were legitimately derived from accounts of history which were themselves, and on an independent basis, judged to be correct. The sociological analysis would thus presuppose the independent verification of the historical accounts and could not be used to correct the latter.

We must note here that the two conceits which Vico claims to be able to eradicate do not represent mistakes made at the level of sociological analysis of the above sort. They are mistakes made by historians at the first-order level of historical interpretation. It would therefore not be possible to test these or eradicate them by confrontation with an "ideal eternal history" arrived at by abstraction. Were there a contradiction here it would be the "ideal eternal history" which would be falsified and not the allegedly incorrect historical account.

If we accepted the abstraction view we should come to a very odd conclusion. We should have to hold that Vico realised that the possibility of acceptable

laws of history presupposed acceptable histories and that the latter had to give a proper account of the historically conditioned nature of the factors which are operative in history, but that he omitted telling us how this requirement could be satisfied. It would be strange that he should see the necessity for the requirement yet fail to suggest how to satisfy it.

The view that the "ideal eternal history" represents a deductive model would entirely avoid this difficulty. It would in the first instance be a model underlying the interpretation of the historical evidence. One would construct it in accordance with those requirements which philosophical considerations had shown to be necessary in any acceptable history. One would thus have a guarantee that where actual historical investigation and interpretation of the evidence confirmed the model (but not, of course, where it failed to do so) the history produced would also satisfy the requirements in the light of which the model had been constructed.

It is useful to note here that where this is achieved we shall have discovered what Vico calls "the nature" of nations.[1] To have such a nature is nothing but to be an instance of the "ideal eternal history". Strictly speaking Vico should say that to have such a nature is to be an instance of an "ideal eternal history". But his whole way of expressing the situation is based upon the presupposition that the project has been successfully carried through to the extent that he can claim that there is one "ideal eternal history" which provides the model for all histories. Vico always talks therefore of "the common nature of nations" rather than of their "nature" to indicate

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[1] Vico distinguishes sharply between the nature of human things, which is knowable to us, and that of physical things which is not. The ground of this distinction is discussed in Chapter XVII below.

his belief that not only does each have a nature (i.e. is related to an "ideal eternal history") but they all have the same nature (i.e. are all instances of the same "ideal eternal history").[1]

In considering Vico's position in relation to the points raised in this chapter it has been necessary to state some aspects of it of which there has been little or no mention in the general elements. Not only are the latter not precise enough to be free from ambiguity but also they are not full enough to give a general idea of all the main aspects of the position necessary to understand and assess it. It would still be impossible satisfactorily to investigate the relation between Vico's main epistemological principle and the various theories so far considered. To do this we require a more detailed account of certain aspects of the theory of an "ideal eternal history". Yet we have exhausted the more important of Vico's explicit remarks about the latter. We shall therefore have to try to extricate the further details required about the theory by a study of the actual "ideal eternal history" Vico offers. The next part of this thesis will try to do this.

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[1] This point is discussed at much greater length in Chapter XVIII below.

PART II

CHAPTER XI

The Two Aspects of the "Ideal Eternal History"

It is necessary first to make some brief remarks about the main aspects of the "ideal eternal history" in order to simplify my later discussion of these. We might begin by asking the question: in what would one expect the "ideal eternal history" to consist in the light of what the general elements have so far revealed?

We have seen that the "ideal eternal history" is to provide a set of laws which will constitute the "nature" of nations and that the "nature" of human institutions, or of a system of institutions, will be understood once we know the context of social needs and purposes for which they arose. To know the latter we must also know at what stage in the development of the human mind such needs and purposes could arise.[1] We might thus expect to find at least two dimensions to the categories in terms of which the "ideal eternal history" will be outlined: There will be first a set of categories deriving from Vico's views about the nature of institutions and their relation to human nature. Adopting a suggestion by Messrs. Bergin and Fisch I shall call this the pattern in cross-section.[2] There will be, in the second place, a genetic account of these institutions deriving from a genetic account of the development of human nature.

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[1] For these last two points, see the discussion of Elements XIV and XV in Chapter VI above.

[2] See "The New Science of Giambattista Vico" revised translation by T. G. Bergin and M. H. Fisch, Anchor Books, 1961, "Introduction" p. xxiii.

To substantiate this briefly we might turn to the set of "more specific propositions" in which Vico puts forward the basis of the "ideal eternal history". As we have seen Vico himself attributes this character to Elements LXVI to XCVI.[1] The first few of these will suffice for our purpose.

In Element LXVI Vico writes: "Men first feel necessity, then look for utility, next attend to comfort, still later amuse themselves with pleasure, thence grow dissolute in luxury and finally go mad and waste their substance".[2]

In Element LXVII he continues: "The nature of peoples is first crude, then severe, then benign, then delicate, finally dissolute".[3]

Vico next gives examples of each type:

> "In the human race first appear the huge and grotesque, like the Cyclopes; then the proud and magnanimous, like Achilles; then the valorous and just, like Aristides and Scipio Africanus; nearer to us, imposing figures with great semblances of virtue accompanied by great vices, who among the vulgar win a name for true glory, like Alexander and Caesar; still later the melancholy and reflective, like Tiberius; finally the dissolute and shameless madmen, like Caligula, Nero and Domitian".[4]

Finally he gives an explanation:

> "This axiom shows that the first sort were necessary in order to make one man obey another in the family-state and prepare him to be law-abiding in the city-state that was to come; the second sort, who naturally did not yield to their peers, were necessary to establish the aristocratic commonwealths on the basis of the families; the third sort to open the way for popular liberty; the fourth to bring in the monarchies; the fifth to establish them; the sixth to overthrow them".[5]

What we are given in these elements is a very general account of the natures of people ("crude", "severe", etc.) related to another very general

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[1] See Chapter II above. [2] N.S. 241. [3] N.S. 242. [4] N.S. 243. [5] N.S. 244.

account of what we might call their springs of action (they "first feel necessity, then look for utility" and so on). The point we must note is that there is an alleged order of succession to these natures and springs of action.

For each type of human nature Vico adduces an example of a paradigm political figure. In this connection he makes two claims: each political figure is necessary for the proper functioning of a certain type of political organisation; and each political figure is also necessary as part of man's preparation for the next stage in the succession of political organisations.

From this it can be seen that each great figure, and that human nature of which he is a paradigm, is both a necessary condition of what is to follow and yet is also necessarily connected to other factors relevant to its own stage, the main one here being the dominant motivation appropriate to it.

It becomes clear that there are therefore two dimensions to the pattern envisaged. There is first a set of correlations between the motivation, nature, type of behaviour and political organisation appropriate to man at any one stage of his history. The nature of the correlation itself is far from clear but at least in the case of the relation between political figure, type of man and type of political organisation, it is suggested that the political figure is "necessary" to the occurrence of the relation between the other two.

More light is thrown on the nature of the principle involved here by the next element. This states that "Governments must conform to the nature of the men governed".[1] Vico adds that "this axiom shows that in the nature of human civil things the public school of princes is the morality of the peoples".

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[1] N.S. 246. [2] N.S. 247.

Both the axiom and its corollary suggest a definite relation of dependence between the nature of government, "the public school of princes" and the nature of the governed as expressed in their moral beliefs. The suggestion is that the nature of the government is determined ("must conform to") by the nature of the governed, the public doings of the rulers by the morality of the governed.

Some points of considerable interest arise out of these passages. First the sequence of springs of action commences with what have hitherto been offered as the sole determinants of "common-sense" judgment, i.e. necessities and utilities. Vico is now extending his account of these factors but the fact that the sequence he offers correlates with a sequence of historically conditioned human natures shows that there are different sets of determinants at different stages in the life-cycle of a nation. Vico should not be taken to suggest that at one stage the determining factor is, say, what people take to be necessary and that at the next this is replaced by what they take to be useful and this again by what they take to be comfortable, then pleasant and so on. What he means is that once people have created the institutions which provide what they take to be necessary, they superimpose upon these other institutions to secure what they hold to be useful and then yet others for comfort and for pleasure and so on. Nor should Vico be taken to suggest that in the course of this development institutions will not be modified in the light of man's increasing requirements. In the case of those institutions which are created for the necessities of life it is clear that, by the end of the sequence, they are so modified that they fail to fulfil their function and the nation dies. Vico is thus extending his sequence of the determinants of human institutions in such a way as to give us the principles necessary for understanding their historical development. He is also suggesting that as this development occurs the principle necessary for a correct understanding of a

whole system of institutions, as it might exist at any one time, becomes increasingly complex. The factors mentioned in Elements XI and XIII are, if taken to be the sole determinants of human activity, now seen to be relevant only to the primitive stages of the life of a nation. The understanding of later stages requires that other principles supplement these.

It is important to note also that Vico has brought in the suggestion that a people's morality is a determining factor in the nature of their government. We know, however, that the ultimate determining factors are to be found in the sequence of "common-sense" judgments. He must therefore be suggesting that morality is an intermediate system of principles by which (some parts of) the nature of government can be explained but which itself is to be explained by more ultimate principles. In effect while some part of the nature of government is to be explained by the morality of the time, the latter is in turn to be explained within the context of a wider system of end-directed kinds of behaviour.

In this Vico is telling us how to construe the relationships subsisting within a nation. It is thus a more detailed working out of the theory suggested in Elements XI, XII, XIV and XV which gave an account of the factors which determine the whole structure of a nation's way of life.

We may now turn to the second aspect of the pattern embodied in the "ideal eternal history". We start by noting that in the passages under discussion Vico claims that each kind of political figure is necessary for man's preparation for the next stage in the sequence of political systems. But if, as we have seen, a certain "morality of the peoples" is itself necessary for the functioning of a particular mode of government or governor, that same "morality of the peoples" is necessary also for the subsequent acceptance of

the next kind of government by the people, of which it is a necessary condition that they be prepared by their present mode of government and type of governor.

To clarify this we take one of Vico's examples from the above passages: the Achilles kind of leader. His behaviour is "proud and magnanimous" but it must "conform" to the nature of the governed, which in this case is "severe". People of a "severe" nature approve of those kinds of activities which are directed towards what is thought to be "useful". Achilles will therefore only be able to do those kinds of things, in his public capacity as a ruler, which the people will accept on the basis of their presumed usefulness. It is a necessary condition of the acceptability of any historical description of the Achilles-type leader that it conform to this requirement.

But also Achilles' behaviour prepares the people to accept the next type of political organisation; Vico says it is necessary for this. The aristocratic commonwealths, the third type of political organisation, can therefore not arise unless Achilles has acted in a certain way in the time of the city-state, the second type. And since, in turn, Achilles could not have acted as he did in the time of the city-state without his actions conforming to the "morality of the people" i.e. to the accepted norms of conduct, it follows that the accepted norms of conduct of the second stage are themselves at least necessary conditions of the acceptance by the people of the type of aristocratic commonwealths of the third stage. From this it follows that a correct description and explanation of the activities of any one stage must show that the moral standards of the previous stage constitute at least its necessary condition.

Thus into the pattern of the "ideal eternal history" is written a series of necessary stages in the development of nations, this necessity being grounded in the claim that the moral condition of a people is not only a necessary condition of their own conduct but also of the next development of their

conduct. The "ideal eternal history" will therefore contain a "genetic" aspect which will trace the necessary sequence of the phases of development of the institutions of any nation.

This goes to show that a full understanding of the nature of a nation or of a system of institutions cannot be gained solely by a consideration of social needs, aims, pressures, forces and a system of social inter-relationships present at any one time in the life of the nation. Although such understanding involves a knowledge of all these factors it involves also a knowledge of their genesis for the latter shows not only how a certain system of institutions arose but explains also why it should have one particular form or structure rather than another.

CHAPTER XII

The Three First Principles

(i)

In investigating Vico's extension of the sequence of determining factors in history it was suggested that there are some factors ("the necessities") which would be involved in the explanation of social structure at its most primitive stage and at all subsequent stages of development while there are others (comfort, pleasure or luxury) which would only be pertinent to the explanation of later stages. Vico has also maintained that social needs and aims necessarily secure the birth of certain institutions.[1] It follows that certain institutions will also be necessary to society both at its most primitive stages and at all other stages, while other institutions again will only arise in the course of its later development.

It will be useful to investigate in more detail what Vico has to say about those institutions which are necessary at all stages of social development. Vico takes them to be specially important and devotes a chapter of Book I specifically to them. In the course of investigating them it will be possible to throw much light on the nature of the deductive model and on the part that providence has to play in it.

The factors in question are referred to by Vico as "the three principles of this science" and in Element V he commended the Platonists for observing

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[1] See Chapter VI above.

their importance. The principles are: "that there is divine providence, that human passions should be moderated and made into human virtues and that the human soul is immortal".[1] In the general elements they were introduced in the context of Vico's contention that man is society-dependent yet, as an individual, controls his behaviour by tendencies ("avarice" and "ferocity") which, if left to operate freely, would "certainly destroy all mankind on the face of the earth".[2] Vico then argued that providence used these anti-social tendences as means towards its own ends, which include the creation and development of the social structure necessary for man's preservation and happiness.

We must now ask how this is to be established. There are two parts to Vico's answer the connection between which is never clearly stated by Vico himself. In the first place we require to know what are the social institutions by virtue of which men are saved from the destruction which their individual activities would bring upon them. In the second place we need to know what are those aspects of man's general nature which secure the birth and continued existence of these necessary social institutions.

We might begin by looking at the institutions themselves and at the way in which Vico tries to establish their necessity. The institutions are religion, marriage and burial of the dead. I shall temporarily ignore the first of these, which will be discussed in much greater detail later and concentrate primarily on the second and, to a lesser extent, the third. In Section III of Book I Vico treats these institutions in two ways. He presents arguments to show that they are in some sense necessary. He also

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[1] N.S. 130. [2] N.S. 132.

brings forward some empirical considerations. I shall commence with the former.

In support of the claim that marriage is a necessary institution Vico adduces the following argument. Let us suppose that marriage did not arise, then:

> "such parents" (i.e. unmarried parents) "since they are held by no necessary bond of law, are bound to abandon their natural children. Since their parents may separate at any time, if they are abandoned by both, the children must lie to be devoured by dogs. If humanity does not bring them up, they will have to grow up with no one to teach them religion, language or any other custom, so that, as for them, they are bound to cause this world of nations, enriched and adorned by so many beautiful arts of humanity, to revert to the great ancient forest through which in their nefarious feral wanderings once roamed the foul beasts ..... among whom bestial venery was practised by sons with mothers and by fathers with daughters".[1]

It has been suggested that we have here to do with conceptual truths, on the ground that a society which did not observe these customs "would not be 'human' but 'feral'".[2] But this cannot be correct for there is no conceptual contradiction in the notion of an advanced society which did not practice marriage. Moreover the argument could not establish the truth of its conclusion by purely conceptual means. In effect Vico is arguing that without marriage and family life there would be no conditions available for the protection and teaching that is necessary for the continued cultivation of certain desirable human customs. The children of unmarried parents would therefore either die or return to a nomadic life. But to establish such a conclusion we should have to rule out the possibility that unmarried parents might have love for their children. In other words, the argument assumes

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[1] N.S. 336.

[2] "Philosophy of History" by Alan and Barbara Donagan, p.8.

Vico's own view of individual human nature as basically "avaricious and ferocious".[1] But this is surely a factual claim to be decided by empirical observation. A statement of it can hence not be used in a proof purporting to establish a conceptual truth.

The character of Vico's argument can be seen if we view it in this way. Let us hypothesise that man is avaricious and ferocious. We can deduce from this what will happen in the case of a way of life which does not include the institution of marriage by bringing in other premises, drawn from our knowledge of man's behaviour in cases where even though marriage is, let us suppose, a norm of behaviour it is nevertheless not practised by all citizens. In other words Vico's argument would run something like this. We know from a study of society that children of a family upbringing are educated in such a way as to be able to keep up, and improve upon, certain standards. We know also that children lacking this family training cannot do this. We can see that in a society such as does not exist but which is conceivable, in which there were no marriage and in which men were "ferocious and avaricious", standards and achievements of the kind mentioned would be impossible. We can therefore see that the institution of marriage is a necessary condition of human advancement for a man of basically vicious nature. On this view Vico is trying by argument to build into his model of the structure of society the suggestion that marriage is a necessary feature using some known truths to help do this.

We might consider here another argument which Vico advances, this time concerning his third principle, that of burial based upon belief in the immortality of the soul:

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[1] N.S. 132.

> "Finally (to realise) what a great principle of humanity burial is, imagine a feral state in which human bodies remain unburied on the surface of the earth as food for crows and dogs. Certainly this bestial custom will be accompanied by uncultivated fields and uninhabited cities".[1]

Again we might be misled by the suggestion, that if we imagine a life without burial we are bound to think of "uncultivated fields and uninhabited cities", into thinking that the opposite supposition is impossible. But this is not so. Our reason for refusing to countenance the opposite supposition is that it contradicts our belief that, say, failure to bury the dead brings disease and so would hinder social advance. But this is a factual belief and so there is here also an implied factual premise.

Our conclusion must be that in these arguments Vico is not trying to establish conceptual truths. He is presenting arguments to support a theory about the sort of social conditions which would in fact, but not in idea, be necessary if a certain kind of man (i.e. avaricious and ferocious man) is to achieve any social progress. The arguments assert what would have to happen if there was to be progress for a man with the suggested nature. They would not leave the realm of hypothesis until it had been established that man had the nature suggested. Such a task would be the work of the historian.

What Vico has done here is to construct a small part of the initial stages of his model. What the arguments try to show is that some institution is a necessary condition of social progress. But they do not establish any general factual truths. Before that could be done the model would have to be confirmed empirically.

It is not, however, to be thought that all that Vico says here about

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[1] N.S. 337.

religion, marriage and burial is based merely upon argument. In fact Vico does not begin his discussion with the arguments but with the following passage:

> "Now since the world of nations has been made by men, let us see in what all men agree and always have agreed. For these things will be able to give us the universal and eternal principles (such as every science must have) on which all things were founded and still preserve themselves.
>
> We observe that all nations, barbarous as well as civilised, though separately founded because remote from each other in time and space, keep these three human customs; all have some religion, all contract solemn marriages, all bury their dead. And in no nation, however savage and crude, are any human activities celebrated with more elaborate ceremonies and more sacred solemnity than religion, marriage and burial. For by the axiom that 'uniform ideas, born among peoples unknown to each other, must have a common ground of truth', it must have been dictated to all nations that from these three institutions humanity began among them all, so that the world should not again become a bestial wilderness. For this reason we have taken these three eternal and universal customs as the three first principles of this Science".[1]

This is a particularly difficult passage to interpret. The difficulty lies in the fact that it can be read in two ways. It can be read first as an account of the method by which one established the principles as universal and necessary, i.e. by empirical confirmation drawn from (historical) evidence on a very wide scale. On this view Vico would be asserting that the three principles were universal and necessary because they had this widespread empirical support. But if we take this view it is difficult to explain what the arguments considered above could add to this. Do they merely confirm that principles known to be necessary are necessary? This view runs into exactly the difficulty which we earlier suggested arises for the abstraction view: how to find a proper function for the reasoning of the philosopher which

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[1] N.S. 334.

Vico holds to be so central to the new science.[1]

The passage can be read in a different way which avoids this difficulty. It can be taken to be Vico's reference to the empirical investigations which first prompted him to think of trying to establish these particular principles as necessary to his science. On this view it is an autobiographical account how Vico came to think these principles might be necessary to society. The philosophical arguments which follow would then still be left with what looks like their proper job: that of constructing a model of the sort of man and the sort of progress to which such institutions would be necessary. This interpretation would have the merit of explaining how Vico's interest in constructing a new science arose from his feeling the need to explain certain empirical correlations. He is pointing to the empirical facts which seemed to him to call for the construction of an explanatory theory. It is left to the philosopher to construct the theory which is necessary if we are ever to rise above the level of noting them as mere correlations and to the philologian or historian to see whether the model does succeed in enabling one to write a new kind of history which both explains better and does more justice to the evidence than the old sort.

It is not possible to decide between these two readings from an internal examination of the above passage. Vico has again failed to express himself unambiguously. But the considerations just mentioned throw considerable weight on the side of the second account.

We must turn now to the second part of this enquiry: how Vico is to explain, without recourse to some supernatural agency, the continued arising and existence of these three necessary features. This is to be done by

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[1] N.S. 138-140.

reference to the action of divine providence in its immanent aspect, but this notion needs considerable explanation itself if it is not to be irremediably supernatural and hence ultimately not amenable to empirical confirmation. Vico has shown that he is aware of the need to give this category criteria which relate to empirical facts. We have also seen that it is of the essence of Vico's conception of human institutions that they are necessarily related to certain social needs and aims. The explanatory aspect of divine providence must therefore come out in explanation by means of this aspect of human activity. In other words the existence of these social institutions has to be shown to be fully explained by certain features of human nature and by certain beliefs to which all humans tend naturally to subscribe.

This suggests that from some points of view these "three first principles" are not to be distinguished from the principles of the other institutions which will figure in the "ideal eternal history". The main significant difference will lie in the fact that these principles are necessary to society at all times and the others only at certain times. The first three principles will therefore figure not only in the genetic pattern, for which they will be the starting point, but also in the pattern in cross-section at any time at which one should choose to study the latter. This will not be true of the other institutions.

Before going on to investigate the significance of this feature, we must look briefly at what Vico has to say about the institutions which figure in these three principles.

The first of the principles Vico claims to find in a belief, held by all societies, that there is a "provident divinity"[1] or, as he sometimes puts it more simply, a belief in "some religion". We must not be misled into dismissing

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[1] N.S. 334.

this contention on the ground that Vico, as a Christian, has simply read into history what he would like to find there. There are other reasons for Vico's attempt to show this principle to be necessary.

We begin by recalling Vico's contention that social activity is essentially end-directed. In a full explanation of human conduct we should require to know why men submit to the norms of conduct thus prescribed. We might attempt to explain this by the suggestion that they can see that it is what they ought to do, perhaps because they can see that it is in their own best interest. But such an explanation, if applied to all history, would presuppose in primitive peoples the ability to reason and would thus lead to the sort of historical mistake embodied in the conceit of the scholars. We might again attempt to explain it by the suggestion that men individually will behave in those ways which are for their own good. But we have seen that Vico, in holding man's individual activity to be guided by "ferocity, avarice and ambition", thinks that this is false. Man's individual actions are to be explained by the fact that each man is "bent on his own private advantage".

What we must seek therefore is some principle which will explain why men accept the norms of conduct they do despite the fact that they neither wish individually to accept them nor can see the real reason for doing so. The answer lies in the notion of authority. They will accept these norms if they believe that they are enjoined on them by an authority and if they believe that the authority has some sanction at its command to enforce their acceptance.

This is the character which Vico first attributes to the notion of religion or of a provident divinity in his "ideal eternal history". It has been suggested above that he did not come to this conception solely by argument nor could the fact that religion actually had this character be established solely by argument. At the same time it is important to realise that the main

function of this principle in Vico's model lies in its ability to explain why primitive men will accept codes of conduct which are both uncongenial to them and for which they cannot see the true reason.

A minor difficulty of interpretation arises here. If it is Vico's contention that belief in a provident being is a necessary condition of society one would expect a pattern for the development of that belief to be traced in the "ideal eternal history". But Vico does not do this. He traces instead an outline of the development of the role of authority in human affairs.[1] This suggests that he had misconceived the relation of religion and authority and that he should have claimed that acceptance of authority was one of the three necessary principles rather than acceptance of belief in a deity, since the latter had the role of an authority in only one phase of its career.

However that may be, it is clear that the idea of a provident being or of an authority finds a place in the "ideal eternal history" taken as a model because it offers an explanation of what would otherwise be very difficult to explain - the acceptance of unpalatable codes of conduct by egoistic and unreasonable men. Whether it ought to be there is a question which cannot be decided without actual historical investigation.

The second of Vico's three principles is the institution of marriage. We discussed earlier his argument to show that this was a necessary condition of society. The argument is interesting not merely as an argument but for the light it throws upon Vico's conception of the social function of marriage. Vico does not attempt to deny that some sort of continuation of the human

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[1] N.S. 386-390 and 942-946.

species could be obtained without recourse to this institution. He is concerned rather to argue, in view of the evident place of notions like training, teaching and education in explaining the continuous and progressive character of society, that without an institution which can secure these there would be no social advance.[1] In the course of this argument Vico clearly implies that the sort of marriage he is talking about is that in which the union is a "necessary bond of law". Again this reveals that he conceives of marriage as a legally established institution, through which is secured that which could not be secured by man's egoistic natural impulses.

One might wonder whether Vico has not erred, this time in confusing a specific institution, marriage, with its social function. For while one might admit that educational institutions are necessary to social progress one might hold that these could be provided by other means than marriage. It might therefore be as well, when further discussing Vico's theories on this point, to remember that when we talk of the institution of marriage in this connection we ought to be talking of those institutions which perform the social functions which Vico attributed to marriage.

Vico's third principle need detain us less. This is the principle of burial of the dead.[2] Vico sees this practice as intrinsically connected with belief in immortality of the soul. It would seem to be particularly difficult to show the latter to be a necessary condition of society but this need not concern us much for Vico uses this principle rather less frequently than the others in "The New Science".

This brief review of the three principles has shown that Vico's account of them needs some correction. He fails to distinguish between the necessity

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[1] N.S. 336. [2] N.S. 337.

for the institution and the necessity for its social function. If we make this distinction for him we can see that what is necessary is not the institution but the securing of its function.

Taken thus the arguments advanced in this chapter of "The New Science" show that society cannot endure unless certain functions are performed. But this correction need not involve any change in the account given of the arguments Vico adduces. It is still the case that these functions are not shown to be conceptually necessary. They are necessary only for a society based upon a certain kind of human nature and whether any society has ever been based upon such a nature is something which can only be decided by historical investigation.

(ii)

The passages considered in this chapter lend considerable weight to the deductive account of Vico's procedure and throw light on its nature. At the same time they show that the model must not be thought of as a deduction from conceptual truths. They show also how Vico conceived the role of philosophy in "The New Science".

It is clear that Vico does not take the proper role of the philosopher to be a concern with conceptual or rational truths although some of his remarks in the general elements might seem open to this construction. It will be recalled that when Vico first introduced his three principles in Element V[1], he suggested that their origin lay with "the political philosophers and first of all the Platonists, who agree with all the lawgivers on these three points ..."

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[1] N.S. 129 and 130.

Since he also went on to suggest that "philosophy contemplates reason whence comes knowledge of the "true"[1] it might seem that he was taking philosophy to be concerned with a priori or necessary truths and the three first principles to be examples of these.

On the other hand, Vico also holds that empirical confirmation is relevant to their establishment. If we took the view that philosophy was concerned with conceptual truths it would be difficult to square these assertions for Vico would seem at once to claim that the principles were conceptually true and yet were supported by empirical evidence. If this were so we should have to conclude that he was guilty of great confusion.

The suggestion that the work of the philosopher is to construct a model of social development runs into no such difficulty provided the hypothetical nature of the model is realised. The model does not tell us what must happen, merely what must happen if its hypothetical premises be true. It tells us what must happen if these premises be true because it deduces its results from its premises. But the premises, as we saw, are themselves factual, hence their truth or falsity can only be established empirically. There is therefore no question of the philosopher usurping from the philologian or historian the work of empirical research which would be required to establish the truth of the theory.

An objection to this account might be that if reasoning can show a certain structure in society to be necessary there is no need to "confirm" this empirically. This argument rests upon a misunderstanding of what is being suggested. If the reasoning of the philosopher were purely conceptual the

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[1] N.S. 138.

objection would be correct. But Vico's arguments have been shown not to be purely conceptual. They rest upon factual hypotheses. The conclusions they try to establish about the nature of society can therefore only be accepted if these premises are accepted and empirical confirmation is required for this.

If we ask the question what Vico is really doing on the above interpretation, we must say that he is offering a model for the interpretation of all history. This is more like sociology as we know it today than anything else. We can safely reject what we might think of as the most extreme empiricist and rationalist accounts of his procedure. He is not doing what the first of these might claim, i.e. he is not merely establishing laws of history by abstraction from various actual histories. This view would leave no room for the reasoning of philosophy. Equally he is not doing what the second might claim, i.e. deducing a model from conceptual or a priori truths. This view would leave no room for the work of confirmation by the philologian. The truth lies in an account of the sort suggested which lies somewhere between these extremes. It is important to note that on this account Vico is entirely free from the difficulty which might arise for anybody attempting to abstract laws of history from actual histories. If any laws come out of Vico's suggestions they will not illicitly presuppose the acceptability of the histories which support them, for the theoretical model which underlies all the histories relevant to the establishment of laws will ensure that they conform to the requisite standards.

CHAPTER XIII

The Construction of The Ideal Eternal History:

The Structure of Social Activity (I)

(i)

The discussion of Elements LXVI to LXIX, in Chapter XI, showed that there are two types of pattern in the "ideal eternal history". One of these represents the working out of a theory about the relation of human nature to the structure of society, and the other of a theory about the necessarily historical or genetic character of the development of such a nature and society. It was also shown that these two patterns or, rather, these two facets of the one pattern, are more detailed workings out of theories we had met with in the general elements. We must now look more closely at the actual account of the "ideal eternal history" offered by Vico, to see whether the character of these patterns can be made clearer. This will be most easily done if we first turn to Book IV of "The New Science", entitled "The Course of Nations" in which Vico presents a summary of his findings.

Vico there maintains that there are three ages through which each nation passes, which he refers to as the age of the gods, the age of the heroes and the age of men. The division is adopted, apparently, from an old Egyptian tradition.[1] In the Introduction to Book IV, having stated this, Vico continues:

> "For the nations will be seen to develop in conformity with this division by a constant and uninterrupted order of causes and effects present in every nation, through three kinds of natures.

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[1] Axiom XXVII, N.S. 173 and N.S. 915.

> From these natures arise three kinds of customs; and in virtue of these three kinds of customs three kinds of natural law of nations are observed; and in consequence of these laws three kinds of civil states or commonwealths are established. And in order that men, having reached the stage of human society, may on the one hand communicate to each other the aforesaid three most important matters (customs, laws, commonwealths), three kinds of languages and as many of characters are formed; and in order that they may on the other hand justify them, three kinds of jurisprudence assisted by three kinds of authority and three kinds of reason in as many of judgments. The three kinds of jurisprudence prevail in three sects of time, which the nations profess in the course of their history."[1]

In this passage we again find the two dimensions of pattern hitherto distinguished. There is first the genetic pattern governing the development of nations. This is referred to in the opening sentence in which Vico claims that "the nations will be seen to develop in conformity with this division by a constant and uninterrupted order of causes and effects present in every nation..." The principal relationship involved here is characterised as causal. There is next a structural relation. Initially between nation and nature, this is extended to include connections between nature and custom, custom and natural law, natural law and civil state; then between these and language and character; finally between these and jurisprudence, authority, reason and judgment.. The relationships involved here are even obscurer than those in the first pattern. "The nations" says Vico, "develop.....through three kinds of natures". What is the relation between nation and nature by which the development of the former can occur "through" the latter? Again: "From these natures arise three kinds of customs." This looks as though it implies some sort of causal dependence, but what sort is most obscure.

We shall concern ourselves in this and the next chapter with trying to

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[1] N.S. 915.

clarify the nature of the relationships involved in the second pattern. To do this it will be necessary, in view of the amount of material involved, to be highly selective. It might therefore be useful to explain the principles on which this has been done.

Although the structural relationships in society change and develop through the three ages it will not be necessary to trace them as they change. It will be enough if we can get a general idea of the sort of view Vico takes and this can be done by examining the relationships as they subsist in any one age. The first age has been chosen for this because here, for reasons which will be explained shortly, Vico works out the principles of the "ideal eternal history" more fully than for any other period.

In investigating the first age we must remember that Vico has already tried to establish the first three principles as necessary to society. It will therefore be useful to investigate the relative influence of each of these separately. At the same time it will also be helpful to make use of the divisions suggested above by Vico. There will therefore be first an investigation of the relationships between nature, custom, natural law and the State as they are affected by the first principle, religious belief. This occupies Part (ii) of the present chapter and is followed in Part (iii) by a discussion of the way in which the material thus presented relates to a number of different parts of Vico's theories as so far revealed.

Chapter XIV (i) continues with an account of the effect of the second and third principles upon the above relationships. It is followed by an account in Part (ii) of the character of language as affected and explained by the three principles. Part (iii) concludes with a brief survey of the third of Vico's divisions, the relationships between jurisprudence, authority, and reason, as affected by the same principles.

(ii)

In Book IV, Section I, Vico describes the first nature thus:

> "The first nature was a poetic or creative nature which we may be allowed to call divine as it ascribed to physical things the being of substances animated by gods, assigning the gods to them according to its idea of each..... Furthermore it was a nature all fierce and cruel; but, through that same error of imagination, men had a terrible fear of the gods whom they themselves had created. From this period there remained two eternal properties: one, that religion is the only means powerful enough to restrain the fierceness of peoples; and the other, that religions prosper when those who preside over them are themselves inwardly reverent."[1]

Vico calls this primitive being "poetic" man. His creative ability is due to his extreme imaginative powers and comparative lack of a critical rational faculty. His nature is to be imaginative, irrational, cruel and fearful of gods who, in fact, are the products of his own imagination.

For a fuller account of this nature we must turn to Book II of "The New Science". In this book Vico gives instances of actual history written in conformity with the "ideal eternal history". When one comes to those Greek and Roman times for which there is some historical evidence his account is, as should be the case, very much fuller and more detailed than the "ideal eternal history". The latter is used as a guide offering insight into the broad, general lines of history. But when dealing with the first stages of the development of nations Vico is dealing with a period for which there is little or no historical evidence. What he does consequently is to try to work out that part of the "ideal eternal history" which applies to this period in greater detail than he does for other periods and offer it as an actual historical account. Whether it can satisfactorily be accepted as such is very doubtful. But the attempt to work out the "ideal eternal history" in more detail for this period has the useful result that it reveals very fully the manner in which the latter is to be constructed. It will therefore be

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[1] N.S. 916.

most instructive for our purpose to follow his procedure here.

In Book II, Section I, entitled "Poetic Metaphysics", Vico writes:

> "From these first men, stupid, insensate and horrible beasts, the philosophers and philologians should have begun their investigations of the wisdom" (i.e. of the "common sense" judgments) "of the ancient gentiles ... And they should have begun with metaphysics which seeks its proofs not in the external world but within the modifications of the mind of him who meditates it. For, as we have said above, since this world of nations has certainly been made by men, it is within those modifications that its principles should have been sought. And human nature, so far as it is like that of the animals, carries with it this property, that the senses are its sole way of knowing things".[1]

Metaphysics for Vico is the study of the human mind;[2] hence his claim here is that the study of history and the principles of history ("the philosophers and philologians") should have been, and by him will be, begun by a study of the nature of the human mind. Moreover, he suggests this is justified since the historian, as the possessor of a mind himself, is in some sort of privileged position for getting at these principles. This last claim refers to Vico's basic epistemological principle, which will be discussed later.[3] Ignoring this for the present, we can say that Vico is maintaining that the history of any one period must start with a study of the human mind. It is also clear from this passage that Vico equates "the human mind" with "human nature", for in the course of it he uses the expressions more or less interchangeably.

We must note that even the "common sense" of poetic man, or poetic wisdom, which, as we saw earlier, underlies custom, cannot be understood or properly treated unless we can discover the nature of his mind. Vico's

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[1] N.S. 374.

[2] Cf. N.S. 2 in which Vico equates "the metaphysical world" with "the world of human minds".

[3] See Chapter XVII below.

suggestion is that the characteristics of men's "common sense" are dependent upon the overall nature of their minds or mental states and tendencies.

This is confirmed by Vico's next remark:

> "Hence poetic wisdom, the first wisdom of the gentile world, must have begun with a metaphysic not rational and abstract like that of learned men now, but felt and imagined as that of the first men must have been who, without power of ratiocination, were all robust sense and vigorous imagination as established in the axioms".

Vico implies here that the conceit of the scholars, the tendency to attribute to former ages the conceptions of one's own, could be avoided if one insisted, as a first condition of history, upon coming to a correct account of the kind of mind possessed by the people of a particular age and of the characteristic way in which this would express itself. Vico is taking the notion of a mind or a nature widely here, to include imagination, emotions and sense-experience as well as intellect. The suggestion is that historians have hitherto erred in thinking that primitive man was guided by intellectual considerations. They should instead have thought of him as being predominantly a creature with a highly developed sensory, imaginative and emotional apparatus, and his life such that its events can be explained by those non-rational factors. At a later stage he will develop an intellect and it will guide his conduct in a way at present to be explained by his emotions and imagination. The interpretation of his subsequent history must recognise this fact.

An account of the nature of society must therefore begin with an account of the nature of man. We must next try to ascertain what sorts of beliefs would be possessed by a man with such a nature. To decide this we must be able to say what sorts of things poetic man must have beliefs about. Vico has just argued that it is a necessary condition of society that it conforms to his three first principles and that these three principles be explained by

certain natural beliefs. We know therefore that poetic man must have had such beliefs. Vico has thus introduced a guiding clue in terms of which we can begin to interpret whatever evidence is available.

That this is the line of reasoning behind Vico's position can be shown if we return to the "Elements". In Element XXX Vico reiterates that "the world of peoples began everywhere with religion", the first of the three principles.[1]

In the next axiom he asserts that: "Wherever a people has grown savage in arms so that human laws have no longer any place among it, the only powerful means of reducing it is religion."[2] Just how this occurs is explained by Vico in the corollary to the element. "This axiom", he writes, "establishes the fact that divine providence initiated the process by which the fierce and the violent were brought from their outlaw state to humanity, and entered upon national life. It did so by awakening in them a confused idea of divinity, which they in their ignorance attributed to that to which it did not belong. Then, through terror of this imagined divinity, they began to put themselves in some order."[3]

In this passage Vico uses the principle as though it explains man's emergence from a bestial way of life into a social way of life. To appreciate that this is not all that he means we must recall the assertion of Element XIV, that "the nature of things is nothing but their coming into being at certain times and with certain modifications". We took this to mean that the nature of an institution was to be found in that stage of development of society at which it occurred and in the social needs and aims of that stage. Applying this principle to the above axiom we see that what it explains is not only why man emerged from a bestial way of life into a social life but also why he continued in that latter way of life. In other words the same principle is used not

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[1] N.S. 176. [2] N.S. 177. [3] N.S. 178.

only to explain the change from one way of life to another, but also to present the rationale behind the continued acceptance of the new way of life. Vico is thus giving more than a principle of historical change; he is also explaining why a certain kind of institution must obtain in a certain kind of society. To put it another way, historical change is to be explained by the needs, utilities and the rest which are secured by the introduction of the change. Without wishing to do more than mention it here, it is worth pointing out that we see in this the beginnings of a theory of the teleological nature of historical explanation.

It is now apparent why all Vico's accounts of the structure of early society start with belief in a provident being: given the mental apparatus of poetic man, such a belief is the only way in which we can explain his continued acceptance of this way of life. We must note, however, that we have not yet come across any account of how it is that we can claim knowledge of the mind of such a man.

In the above quotations[1] Vico's claims go beyond asserting that early man accepted the social way of life because he thought it was enjoined upon him by the gods whom he feared. They include also an account of how the belief in these gods arose or, rather, how it is to be explained, i.e. by recourse to a particular use of poetic man's creative or imaginative abilities.

To understand this we must return to the elements, and in particular to the first two elements. When I originally dealt with these two elements, I treated them with reference to their bearing on the historian's problem. At the same time I pointed out that this represented only a part of the use they are given in "The New Science".[2] We must now turn to their second function.

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[1] N.S. 178 and 916. [2] See Chapter III above.

The first two elements claim that man, when ignorant of the true causes of some phenomenon, tends to explain it in terms of principles appropriate either to his own nature or to things with which he is familiar.[1] These are general elements, relevant to the whole of "The New Science". If we turn to Element XXXII we find a statement of the way the content of these two elements bears directly upon the nature of poetic man. It is stated that: "When men are ignorant of the natural causes producing things, and cannot even explain them by analogy with similar things, they attribute their own nature to them. The vulgar, for example, say the magnet loves iron."[2]

What this claim amounts to is that when men are ignorant of the nature of things, they will tend to interpret them on animistic lines by attributing human, mental abilities to the non-human. Early humans will attribute to things abilities of the type they themselves possessed rather than those possessed by later men.

Together with this will go another tendency, noted in Element XXXIII: "The physics of the ignorant is a vulgar metaphysics by which they will refer the causes of the things they do not know to the will of God, without considering the means by which the divine will operates."[3] In other words, such men will tend to look upon God as the direct cause of anything they cannot understand. And this is so because, as Vico points out in the next axiom, it "is a true property of the human mind that 'minds once cowed are prone to superstition'. Once men are seized by a frightful superstition they refer to it all they imagine, see or even do".[4]

The upshot of these, and the subsequent axioms of this section, is to explain the two tendencies, to animism and to the notion of a physically active god, which themselves produce the set of beliefs described in Book II,

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[1] N.S. 120 and 122. [2] N.S. 180. [3] N.S. 182. [4] N.S. 183.

Section I, on "Poetic Metaphysics". Hence:

> "poetic wisdom the first wisdom of the gentile world, must have begun with a metaphysic not rational and abstract like that of learned men now, but felt and imagined as that of the first men must have been who, without power of ratiocination, were all robust sense and vigorous imagination as established in the axiom. This metaphysic was their poetry, a faculty born with them (for they were furnished by nature with these senses and imaginations); born of their ignorance of causes, for ignorance, the mother of wonder, made everything wonderful to men who were ignorant of everything, as noted in the axioms. Their poetry was at first divine because they imagined the causes of the things they felt and wondered at to be gods....." and "at the same time they gave the things they wondered at substantial being after their own ideas...."[1]

Vico's contentions here are clear enough. In the first place there is the claim that in the conceptual scheme of poetic man there would be no place for the distinction between the animate and the inanimate. There would instead be a widespread tendency to what is now called "the pathetic fallacy" in which such statements as "the magnet loves iron" would be taken as literal truth. Secondly, insofar as such people had notions about the causes of things these would be attributed to various gods, thought of as substantial beings. The notion of a divinity directly and physically active would be central in such a conceptual scheme.

Thus arises the conception of nature as "a vast and animate body which feels passions and effects", the cause of whose activities, as indeed of the activities of poetic man himself, would be the gods.[2]

Vico's next move in this chapter is to sketch the sort of relationship which must have arisen between poetic man and his gods thus created and conceived, particularly insofar as it affected man's activities. This takes the form of an account of the arts of divination and of the taking of the auspices, i.e. of the attempts to learn the purposes and desires of the gods, through the interpretation of various natural phenomena conceived to be signs

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[1] N.S. 375. [2] N.S. 377.

from these gods. For, having assumed God to be the direct cause of all movement, these "first men, who spoke by signs, naturally believed that lightning bolts and thunder claps were signs made to them by Jove..... They believed that Jove commanded by signs, that such signs were real words, and that nature was the language of Jove. The science of this language the gentiles universally believed to be divination, which by the Greeks was called theology, meaning the science of the language of the gods....."[1]

But if nature is God's language and law what he commands we require experts to read these for us.[2] Therefore "they were called theological poets or sages who understood the language of the gods expressed in the auspices of Jove; and were properly called divine in the sense of diviners, from "divinare", to "divine" or "predict"..... Because they were versed in this mystic theology, the Greek poets, who explained the divine mysteries of the auspices and oracles, were called "mystae", which Horace learnedly translates "interpreters of the gods". Every gentile nation had its own sybil versed in this science..... Sybils and oracles are the most ancient things of the gentile world".[3]

We must note that in this sequence of argument, Vico has been following the same sequence mentioned in the Introduction to Book IV, on "The Course of Nations". There, it will be recalled, he wrote of "three kinds of natures", of which we have just considered the first. He talked also of "three kinds of customs" which "arose" from these natures. We have just observed a relationship between custom and nature. There were again "three kinds of natural laws" which were observed "in virtue of these customs".

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[1] N.S. 379.

[2] Cf. N.S. 398 for an explanation of the notion of law as that which the art of divination reveals as God's commands.

[3] N.S. 381.

We have seen how law will be that which is commanded by the gods, related to the custom of taking the auspices. Finally, he wrote of three kinds of "civil states or commonwealths", which are established in consequence of these laws. We have at least arrived at the expectation that there will be a strong sacerdotal element in the form of state likely to arise in these circumstances.

(iii)

It is appropriate here to interrupt this account of Vico's conception of the nature of early society, to discuss a number of points which arise from the passages just considered. We might begin by asking ourselves what new light this more detailed account throws on the character of the relationships between human nature, custom, natural law and civil state.

It is clear that what the account of the nature of poetic man as a creature of great imaginative gifts but lacking in critical abilities explains, is the reason why his religious beliefs had their own peculiar character. Likewise, what these religious beliefs explain is why his activities, both his customs and his legal duties, had their peculiar character. And what they in turn explain, is why the sort of state which existed had its particular characteristics. In other words, we are offered a series of levels of explanatory statements, so interrelated that a request for the explanation for the particular character possessed by a form of state could only be fully answered by a series of reasons which would find their resting place in a description of the nature of man. Looked at from this point of view Vico is offering an interrelated series of explanations.

At the same time this is not all that Vico offers. There is also an actual historical account, i.e. an account of successive stages of activity. First, we are told, men created the idea of God as the direct cause of every-

thing. Then "they pictured the sky to themselves as a great animated body".[1] They next began to practise the arts of divination and prediction, after which developed the priestly caste. We have here something much more like an account of the successive events of early history.[2] As such Vico is offering a set of descriptions of what occurred.

Vico is therefore giving one account both to describe and explain the same phenomena. His procedure thus confirms the earlier conclusion we reached when considering the general elements, that history is never either purely descriptive or purely explanatory; there is always an element of both in any proper historical account.[3] The question what happened cannot be answered unless we can also give the reason why it happened: it is of the essence of human activity that it cannot be fully described without some account of its rationale. Written history, which deals with human activity, must therefore conform to this requirement.

In giving the one account both to describe and to explain Vico is revealing that he interprets the above requirement very strictly. It is not merely that explanation is necessary in history but also that the categories which are relevant to the description of significant historical change are related to the categories which are relevant to the explanation of human conduct. This amounts to the claim that we explain by describing. Nor should there be any mystery how this can be so. Vico's account above can be read in the two ways because his selection of what is significant in history and so should be described is governed by his conception of what sorts of things or events explain what other sorts of things. It follows from this that the

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[1] N.S. 377.

[2] Vico does in fact try to put a date on these events. cf. N.S. 377.

[3] See Chapter VI above.

genetic pattern and the structural pattern, which we are now considering, cannot, except for purposes of convenience, really be separated. The factors which appear in any account of the pattern of what must happen in history and, deriving from this, any account of what actually happened, must be selected and arranged in accordance with categories which are relevant to the explanation of human activity. Thus it is that a historical account can explain an event by describing antecedent events without necessarily bringing in any overtly explanatory statements.

An objection can be made against this view by raising the question: is what is offered in the passages under discussion intended to be history at all? The question can arise because of Vico's language, in which we find a peculiar mixture of what might be taken to be phrases appropriate to a priori speculation together with others more obviously appropriate to an historical account.

For example, Vico opens the chapter on "Poetic Metaphysics" with a denunciation of philosophers and historians for not having begun their accounts of primitive epochs with a consideration of the human nature of those concerned. He gives his own account of this and then continues: "Hence poetic wisdom, the first wisdom of the gentile world, must have begun with a metaphysic, not rational and abstract.....but felt and imagined."[1] Here the phrase "must have begun" has an a priori ring to it. Yet in the next sentence he changes to the descriptive mode in his statement that: "This metaphysic was their poetry, a faculty born with them....." Is this a statement of how they were or of how they must have been? The ambiguity continues: "In such fashion the first men of the gentile nations.....created things according to their ideas."[2]

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[1] N.S. 375. [2] N.S. 376.

This looks like description. Yet: "of such natures must have been the first founders of gentile humanity....."[1]; this can hardly be description. Is Vico talking, in all this, of what happened or of what had to happen? And, if of what had to happen, how are we to take the sense in which it had to happen and where does this leave the work of actual historical research?

Perhaps it is these uncertainties which led Croce to accuse Vico of "doing violence to the facts".[2] For, on Croce's account, where Vico "found himself faced by uncertain facts, instead of patiently waiting till the discovery of further evidence should dispel the doubt, he cut the knot by accepting the fact, as he put it, in conformity with laws.....so that the comparison with facts, which none the less he recommends for the sake of confirmation, became strictly speaking superfluous".

But this is by no means the only view possible. To find a more plausible alternative, we must begin by trying to be more precise than we have so far about the nature of the relationship between human nature and human activity as conceived by Vico and then apply our result to the problem of historical method.

From the nature of Vico's procedure in the above arguments, it seems probable that he conceives the nature of the relation between man's nature and all that follows from it to be such that in the former lie normally the sufficient and necessary conditions for the occurrence of the latter. Here the proviso implied by the word "normally" must be noted, for it is of great importance. As we shall see later, Vico by no means thinks that a certain nature must always, so to speak, fulfil itself by the creation of the appropriate beliefs, activities and institutions. There are certain conditions under which it may be prevented from so doing. But when these are lacking,

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[1] N.S. 377. [2] "The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico" p.41.

Vico takes the relationship to be as described above and, when describing those occurrences to which this relation is relevant, indicates it by the notion of the one set of phenomena being a "natural" outcome of the other.

We can see some examples of this in the course of the account we have been considering. Having pictured the sky "as a great animated body" the poetic men "began to exercise their natural curiosity which is the daughter of ignorance and the mother of knowledge....."[1] Again, "the first men, who spoke by signs, naturally believed that lightning bolts and thunder claps were signs made to them by Jove....."[2] Or yet again: "Thus, in accordance with what has been said in the Axioms about the principles of the poetic characters, Jove was born naturally in poetry as a divine character....."[3] And when we turn to the appropriate axiom we find it is one of three about the origins of the concepts in terms of which poetic man thought. Vico writes: "These three axioms give us the origin of the poetic characters that constitute the essence of the fables. The first of the three shows the natural inclination of the vulgar to invent them, and to invent them appropriately..... The second shows that man had a natural need to create poetic characters....."[4]

From these and, indeed, from countless other examples, we can see the importance of the notion of a natural connection in Vico. Its meaning, as I have suggested above, is that under certain conditions, which must be specifiable, and which tend to occur as the physical context of human activity, man's nature constitutes the sufficient and necessary conditions of his activity. Or, as has been suggested by Messrs. Bergin and Fisch, the latter follows spontaneously from the former.[5]

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[1] N.S. 377. [2] N.S. 379. [3] N.S. 381. [4] N.S. 209.

[5] See "The New Science of Giambattista Vico", revised translation by T. G. Bergin and M. H. Fisch, Introduction pp. XXXIII - XXXIV.

From this it follows that one can deduce the general outlines of man's customs and institutions provided one has knowledge of the ways in which his nature will express itself where this is allowed to occur spontaneously i.e. if one has knowledge of general rules stating a connection between a certain nature and certain kinds of activity. Has Vico given any such rules? The answer here is clearly in the affirmative. We have just seen that poetic man's beliefs about God's nature arose as a result of certain tendencies of the mind which Vico stated first most generally in Elements I and II and later in a form modified to conform to the nature of poetic man in Element XXXII. We should note that these rules were synthetic. There has been no suggestion of a conceptual connection between, say, being ignorant and tending to think anthropomorphically. Nor is it possible to see how there could be.

But even if the rules were synthetic ought we not still to conclude that Vico thought that we could by means of them write history without recourse to factual confirmation? ~~Is it~~ Is it still not the case that, as Croce claims, factual confirmation is "strictly speaking superfluous"?

The answer to this lies, surely, in the nature of the rules themselves. The sorts of rules we have dealt with state only connections between kinds of things and kinds of activities. It follows that at most we can use them to deduce what kind of activity, or custom or institution will occur in society. But what will happen in particular cases cannot be deduced from this and so recourse to empirical evidence will not be superfluous to the writing of history.

There is another point to be made here. If the rules state synthetic connections whose truth is not known <u>a priori</u>, as seems obvious from the examples being considered, they will themselves ultimately stand in need of confirmation and this can only be empirical even if in a rather indirect way.

How are they, and the "ideal eternal history" deduced from them, to be confirmed? The answer, as has been suggested earlier, is that they are confirmed when the "ideal eternal history" deduced from them offers the general principles necessary for a plausible interpretation of (all) the historical evidence. In other words in its logical structure Vico's procedure is similar to the hypothetico-deductive method of the physicist.

This view cannot be established definitively without a consideration of Vico's "proofs".[1] But the discussion so far has lent it considerable plausibility. We know that Vico claims ultimately to establish knowledge of historical laws.[2] We saw, when discussing the first three principles, that Vico's arguments to establish certain features of his pattern involved deducing the consequences of factual hyotheses about human nature and so were more akin to the theoretical reasoning of the scientist than the a priori reasoning of the philosopher.[3] In the general elements, moreover, Vico insisted that the philosopher should put aside his over-abstract reasonings by taking account of "man as he is"[4] and that he should "confirm" his "reasonings by appeal to the authority of the philologians".[5] The above suggestion is certainly consistent with all these admonitions and presents a very plausible sense in which philosophic reasoning could be said to be confirmed by appeal to the findings of the historian.

If the suggestion is correct factual confirmation, far from being superfluous, is of the first importance. Here, however, we must distinguish between various kinds of factual verification which are used by Vico with little attempt to observe their different characters.

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[1] See Chapter XVI below. [2] N.S. 137 to 140. See Chapter V above.
[3] See Chapter XII above. [4] N.S. 132. [5] N.S. 140.

There is first the sort of factual verification which would be appropriate to the attempt to establish historical laws by the hypothetico-deductive method. As applied in the physical sciences that method has the following character. First we offer a hypothesis (or theoretical system[1]) and deduce from this what must be the case if the hypothesis is true. Empirical tests are then carried out to check that the consequences are in fact as predicted. If they are not the hypothesis is falsified; if they are it is corroborated or confirmed. Confirmation is thus provided when it is recognised that what must be the case if the hypothesis is true is in fact the case. There is here no philosophical difficulty about what constitutes such recognition.

The situation is different when this method is applied to history. For in this sphere there are no acceptable facts with which to confirm the results of the prediction. What there is, instead, is evidence and the nature of the facts "behind" this evidence is very much in question. There can therefore be no confirmation by appeal to the facts. What we can ask instead, however, is whether the hypothesis or theory can produce a plausible interpretation of the evidence, which would thus confirm it.

Whether Vico says anything about what is to count as "plausible" or "implausible" here will be discussed later.[2] What we can do instead is give some examples of the above procedure connected with the passages we have been considering. Vico has offered an account of the manner in which poetic man came to conceive of natural phenomena as signs from Jove i.e. as signs of God's will. He also maintains, as we have seen, that the history of the meanings of words is governed by the history of such conceptions. One might therefore expect the word whose original meaning was "to make a sign" to come

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[1] Cf. "The Logic of Scientific Discovery" by K. R. Popper, P. 32.

[2] See Chapters XVI and XVIII below.

to be attached to the notion of God's will with which such signs were associated. From this, according to Vico, we derive a plausible account of how "nuo" which first meant "to make a sign" came, in its later form "numen", to mean "the divine will".[1] This is an example of how a theory or hypothesis about the history of men's activities is corroborated by the linguistic evidence.

In a similar example from the same paragraph we find Vico explaining how Jove was first called "Soter" or "saviour" because poetic man, attaching his own cruel nature to him (an exemplification of Element I), took Jove also to be cruel and hence was grateful for what he took to be an act of exceptional kindness by Jove in sparing him from death; and how this later became "Stator" (stayer or establisher) once poetic man had conceived that Jove wished him to give up his nomadic ways for a domiciled existence. Here again a hypothesis about the history of man's activities is confirmed by linguistic evidence.

In this connection the following point must be emphasised. What we are dealing with here is a logical thesis, i.e. an account of the nature of the corroboration afforded a historical theory, and the theory of human nature to which it is logically connected, by the ability of the historical theory to provide a plausible principle of interpretation of the linguistic evidence.

It is not to be construed, even though Vico's language rather invites this, as a methodological recommendation. In other words, we are not to assume that the method involved is that of first working out, in complete independence of the historical evidence, how one would expect men with the hypothesised nature to behave and then see if this is confirmed by the linguistic evidence. Methodologically, one must start from what one knows; and this may involve a

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[1] N.S. 379.

little at both ends, i.e. something about the principles of human nature and something about the meanings of the words used as linguistic evidence. What is required is that the two should be brought into a consistent relationship and thus corroborate each other.

The second type of confirmation provided in these passages is rather different. Vico, as we have seen, argues that the first men must have attributed a divine nature to whatever they could not understand. In one passage he then writes:

> "This is now confirmed by the American Indians, who call gods all the things that surpass their small understanding. We may add the ancient Germans dwelling about the Arctic Ocean, of whom Tacitus tells that they spoke of hearing the Sun pass at night from west to east through the sea, and affirmed that they saw the gods. These very rude and simple notions help us to a much better understanding of the founders of the gentile world with whom we are now concerned."[1]

The confirmation here provided is not that of being able to adduce a consistent interpretation of all the historical evidence. In these cases there is an appeal to allegedly reliable sources, Tacitus or from whomsoever Vico gathered his information about the American Indians, and it is claimed that the way in which they understood the notion of a god, being consistent as it is with Vico's account of the way in which poetic man understood this notion, confirms his account of the latter. We must note that the thesis that all men and all nations share the same nature is assumed by this confirmation. For if the laws of the nature of man and society were discovered and authenticated inductively then, as we said before, such analysis would presuppose acceptable historical accounts and could not be used to corroborate them. But if we assume the contention that all men and societies have the

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[1] N.S. 375.

same nature it becomes legitimate to use what is well known in one case to corroborate what is less well supported in others.

The third type of corroboration used here is different again. Vico has argued that poetic men did not distinguish between animate and inanimate. Therefore, he continues, "they gave the things they wondered at substantial being after their own ideas, just as children do, whom we see take inanimate things in their hands and play with them and talk to them as though they were living persons..... In such fashion the first men of the gentile nations, children of nascent mankind as we styled them in the Axioms, created things according to their own ideas."[1]

It is here suggested that the phases of development of the abilities, and the conceptions implied in these, of children throws light on, and perhaps corroborates (though Vico does not explicitly say this), the history of such development in early man. It certainly helps us to understand him. However, rather than pursue this theory through "The New Science" in an endeavour to characterise it more accurately, it might be better to leave it noted here as being of some relevance to these questions of corroboration.

From these considerations as to the nature of Vico's procedure we may now return to the question from which all this sprang: is Vico writing factual history or is he giving us some a priori account of how society must have grown? Again, what is the explanation of his continued alternation between phrases which suggest there is some a priori or necessary character involved ("poetic wisdom.....must have begun with a metaphysic not rational"[2] and "Of such natures must have been the first founders of gentile humanity....."[3]) and phrases which suggest that he thinks he is narrating historical facts

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[1] N.S. 375 and 376. [2] N.S. 375. [3] N.S. 377.

("In such fashion the first men.....created things according to their own ideas."[1])?

In part the answer to this has already been suggested. Much of the account of the life of poetic man as we have been discussing it is taken from Book II of "The New Science" in which Vico is trying to present history as it should be written in the light of the "ideal eternal history". But the particular part of history with which he first deals, the career of poetic man, happens to concern a period for which there was no available evidence. What Vico has done therefore is to work out fairly fully that part of the "ideal eternal history" which would be relevant to this period, confirm it with whatever evidence was available (which is really quite insufficient for the purpose in hand) and present it as actual history, although admittedly of a very general kind.

This is clearly unacceptable. To write a history for this period Vico would have required much more linguistic evidence to confirm that people acted in general in the way the model suggests, and, if possible, some other sources giving accounts of actual happenings which could be interpreted within this general framework. Only then could we say that we knew something of the history of this period.

But this is not the whole story. That Vico was able to try to pass off part of the "ideal eternal history" as actual history shows the very intimate connection he conceived to hold between them. The alternation of the apodeictic with the assertorial mode of expression in these passages therefore also reflects Vico's awareness of the nature of historical reasoning as it has just been described. If the nature of man is as we think it is, he says, his activities must have the character we ascribe to them for in the one lie

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[1] N.S. 376.

the necessary and sufficient conditions of the occurrence of the other. It follows that if human activity can only be understood in its connection with human nature, in describing what happened we show also that it must have happened in that way, given our account of human nature.

One might wonder here whether Vico does try to show that human activity could not take a different course, even given the particular characteristics he ascribes to human nature. In the passages under discussion he does not do so. But "The New Science" abounds with his assertions that the course of human activity could not have been as described by other philosophers and historians because their accounts conflict with what is known of human nature as confirmed by the various types of proof offered by Vico.

In the concluding paragraph of the chapter we are considering, there is the summary of such an argument:

> "This discovery of the origins of poetry does away with the opinion of the matchless wisdom of the ancients, so ardently sought after from Plato to Bacon's 'De Sapientia Veterum'. For the wisdom of the ancients was the vulgar wisdom of the lawgivers who founded the human race, not the esoteric wisdom of the great philosophers. Whence it will be found, as it has been in the case of Jove, that all the mystic meanings of lofty philosophy attributed by the learned to the Greek fables and the Egyptian hieroglyphics are as impertinent as the historical meanings they both must have had are natural." [1]

Vico is here returning to one of his favourite examples. What likelihood is there, he demands, that in the society of poetic man we shall find evidence of an awareness of the immutable natural law so beloved of theorists or of the conceptions of philosophers, when, as we have shown, the minds of men were so primitive that they had not yet arrived at the distinction between the animate and the inanimate and, indeed, whose every expression, improbable

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[1] N.S. 384..

as this may seem to us, must be taken as meaning literally what it says? In other words, it would be quite beyond people of the mentality described to have given allegorical expression to philosophical or legal insights. What looks like allegory is, in fact, nothing but their literal way of expressing the world as they saw it.

We see, in this sort of argument, evidence of a sort of philosophical reasoning applied to history. Vico implies here that it is not enough to show in history that certain activities occurred and that these occurred in a context of certain beliefs. We also have to show that these beliefs were the only possible ones i.e. that they embodied distinctions, the grounds for which alone were available to the people concerned and did not embody conceptions and distinctions of which this is not true. In the passages we have been discussing, for example, there is the contention that poetic man did not have the distinction between animate and inanimate. We need also, however, to show that he could not have had it, and Vico does this by showing that, according to that historical hypothesis which is confirmed by his various methods, poetic man was still at the stage of total anthropomorphism in which everything which appeared to require explanation was explained by belief in an imagined entity whose sole function was to be a subject for the possession of a nature similar to man's own. In such a world there could be no ground for the distinction between animate and inanimate and so, as Vico writes, in Element XXXIII, "the physics of the ignorant is a vulgar metaphysics by which they refer the causes of the things they do not know to the will of God....."[1]

Thus, because of the indispensable place of human ideas in human

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[1] N.S. 182.

activities, the history of the latter must not only be accompanied by a history of the former but also by a philosophical criticism to show that the grounds necessary for the various distinctions embodied in the beliefs in question were the only ones genuinely available to the peoples concerned. We here see a second way in which history cannot merely be narration of the facts, for the conceptions which form a necessary aspect of these facts must be shown to be the only ones historically and philosophically possible. Of course, we must recognise that it is never possible to provide a logical guarantee that a certain belief would be the only one possible in certain circumstances, but then neither can the hypothetico-deductive method show a certain scientific hypothesis to be the only one possible. It can, however, be used to vindicate one out of a limited number of viable possibilities and it is in this way that Vico's method also should be taken.

In view of this it is even less surprising that Vico's language should fluctuate between that which would be appropriate to the statement of fact. For the "facts" of history are always supported by arguments whose general form is deductive. Sometimes Vico's language is chosen to reflect this, at others it is not. Thus, to repeat an earlier example, he writes: "Hence poetic wisdom.....must have begun with a metaphysic not rational and abstract...."[1] Here Vico uses the apodeictic mode. For the justification of this usage, however, we need only look to the preceding proposition in which he writes: "And human nature, so far as it is like that of animals, carries with it this property, that the senses are its sole way of knowing things."[2] Here we have the outline of an argument whose force would be to show that the character attributed by Vico to poetic wisdom is the only viable one consistent with

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[1] N.S. 375. [2] N.S. 374.

what is hypothesised about the nature of poetic man. The use of the apodeictic mode is thus justified.

Finally, in respect of these passages, it is necessary to point out one other feature of Vico's procedure. This is the fact that he draws upon a number of principles which must be thought of as having a universal character. I refer here not merely to the notion that religion performs a function necessary to the maintenance of society, but also to those principles of human nature which Vico has introduced and which, when we first met with them in the first and second elements, we treated as being relevant primarily to the explanation of the need for a critical basis to history.[1]

We must note now that these principles are used also by Vico as the hypothetical basis of historical explanation in the sense that they are taken to be premises from which a certain account of social activity is to be derived. Their own justification is, of course, another matter.

We must note further that to be used in this way these axioms are restated as more specific elements. In order that in this restatement nothing should be introduced which would invalidate Vico's procedure we require an account of the principles on which it should rest. Such a requirement has not so far been explicitly acknowledged by Vico, but we shall show later that he was aware of it.[2]

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[1] See Chapter III above. [2] See Chapters XV and XVII below.

CHAPTER XIV

The Construction of The Ideal Eternal History

The Structure of Social Activity (II)

(i)

We have so far investigated the structure of poetic society as it is affected by the first of Vico's three principles. Vico has used the latter to explain the nature and the genesis of those beliefs and institutions by adherence to which man's acceptance of a final authority in society is achieved. Such acceptance is itself necessary to society.[1] It will be convenient now to proceed to the function of the second and third principles.

The second institution necessary to all societies is that of marriage. Our discussion of the three principles showed that Vico holds marriage to be necessary because it fostered between people a system of human relationships and emotional and moral bonds. These in turn secured the education and training without which no social progress would be possible. At the same time marriage is to be explained by reference to man's nature.

We must re-emphasise here what we saw earlier: that there is no conceptual or logical necessity attached to the notion of marriage. Vico does not mention such a possibility but there is no reason to think that he would not have admitted the conceivability of a society in which there was no such institution. He would, however, have treated such a conception as irrelevant

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[1] See Chapter XII above.

to the issues in hand. What would be relevant would be only the question whether we had grounds for believing that a society based on man's nature as described by Vico could exist without marriage. Vico claims that it could not.

At first sight Vico's position appears to involve an inconsistency. If marriage is an institution to be explained by reference to man's nature, an institution which is necessary because through it can be achieved those things necessary to progress which would not be achieved if individual men merely consulted their own wishes and pursued their own purposes, how can we explain it by reference to men who do just that? Surely it cannot be explained by reference to them.

Vico is not, in fact, guilty of confusion here. For marriage is not to be explained by man's nature per se but by man's nature under the influence of his belief in a provident being. Vico goes so far as to claim that marriage could only endure in the sort of early society with which we are now dealing if sanctioned and enforced by religion. The institution of religion is therefore a necessary condition for marriage. Vico explains this in the following way:

> "Moral virtue began, as it must, with effort. For the giants" (the first primitives of each nation) "confined under the mountains by the frightful religion of the thunderbolts, learned to restrain their bestial habit of wandering wild through the great forest of the earth, and acquired the contrary custom of remaining hidden and settled in their fields. Hence they later became the founders of the nations and the lords of the first commonwealths..... And with this effort likewise the virtue of moderation began to show itself among them, restraining their bestial lust from finding its satisfaction in the sight of heaven, of which they had a mortal terror. So it came about that each of them would drag one woman into his cave and would keep her there in perpetual company for the duration of their lives. Thus the act of human love was performed under cover, in hiding, that is to say,

> in shame; and they began to feel that sense of shame which Socrates described as the colour of virtue. And this, after religion is the second bond that keeps nations united, even as shamelessness and impiety destroy them.
>
> Such was the origin of marriage, which is a chaste, carnal union, consummated under the fear of some divinity."[1]

This passage, clear in itself, deserves some comment. Marriage cannot be fully explained by man's nature in its most primitive state, for in that latter state men wish to act promiscuously. Therefore it can only exist in a climate of opinion in which men feel shame at promiscuity. But shame can only obtain in a context in which men are conscious of a distinction between what they are doing and what they ought to do, in other words, in a context of moral norms. But again, the egoistic primitive has no natural impulse to moral norms, i.e. no innate moral sense. His acceptance of the notion that he ought to try to do certain things and not others is therefore, in view of his nature as we know it, to be explained by his fear of the consequences of not so doing, which itself can only be explained once he has begun to believe in a cruel provident being.

What is interesting is that this passage can be read both as an account of the conceptual context in which marriage can be explained and understood, and as an historical account of the arising of the institution of marriage. In this second reading, of course, both accounts are embodied, for the description of the historical sequence of change at once also explains it. We have thus another example of Vico's contention that historical description must necessarily be explanatory as well.

One other comment is worth making here. We note that there is an implied distinction between what we might call social emotions and natural emotions. We might think of shame, "the colour of virtue", as a social emotion in that,

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[1] N.S. 504, 505.

on Vico's view, it seems to presuppose a moral and hence a social context. It is clear that he thinks of it in this way, for had he thought of it otherwise, he could have built it in as part of man's nature per se, and explained marriage as arising from an innate sense of shame. But he does not do so. He argues rather that shame presupposes a sense of moral virtue and that the sense of moral virtue presupposes fear of a retributive god. So if there is a natural emotion here, something more like a non-derivative feeling, it is fear, while shame is distinctly a more sophisticated feeling which presupposes a more developed context of beliefs. But since this is also a historical account, we have here a glimpse of Vico's conception of the necessarily historical nature of much of man's own psychological equipment.

The third of the "three first principles" is the practice of burial of the dead or rather that principle which in poetic times takes the form of burial of the dead. For the principle quickly turns out to be belief in the immortality of the human soul. This is taken by Vico to be necessary in the creation and sustaining of the notion of heredity, which is itself necessary to those customs whose rationale turns upon a recognition of rights and responsibilities between generations of the same family, such as those which obtain between grandchildren and grandparents.[1]

We find, therefore, that these three "principles" explain at once the origin and rationale of a large part of those systems of custom, rights and responsibilities which constitute, for Vico, the essence of society. They are necessary not in any unconditioned sense, but in the sense that, given man's particular nature, they alone can bring about, and explain, his acceptance of what is ultimately necessary for his own good. We must therefore observe that they do not themselves constitute a fully sufficient account of the arising

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[1] N.S. 529-531.

and nature of society. Their nature is to be explained, and can only be explained, by reference to man's own nature and the account Vico offers of that.

We have seen that Vico claims that there is a very close connection between custom and law, particularly in the case of early societies. In his summary of the "ideal eternal history" in Book IV he writes: "In virtue of custom three kinds of natural law of nations are observed".[1] The nature of the connection involved has already been explained in the discussion of Elements CIV and CV. It is only necessary to emphasise that natural law as here conceived, i.e. as a system of rights, duties, responsibilities and obligations, is to be thought of as enforceable. The full explanation of man's activities can therefore not be achieved without an account of the nature of the mechanism by which this is brought about. This is how Vico thinks of the government, i.e. as an institution for the conservation and legal enforcement of that system of civil and human relationships which constitute the essence of society. In the poetic age, with which we are dealing, the content of the natural law will not be a system of relationships seen by rational men to be just and equitable and accepted because of this, but that behaviour which poetic man would see to be appropriate towards the being to whom he attributes control of the universe and accepted because of his fear of the consequences of non-acceptance. In such a context, government would also be theocratic; fear of disobeying the gods would soon bring about fear of disobeying those who claimed to understand the gods' wishes and to be able to make pleas and intercessions, in either direction, with them.

Finally, in this connection, it is useful merely to record the extent

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[1] N.S. 915.

to which Vico himself insists that all the beliefs of the age be interpreted in conformity with the principles of man's nature under the transfiguring infulence of his acceptance of the three necessary principles. We have already seen how a poetic physics arose and is explained, with its whole apparatus of divine activity in the world.[1] In such a scheme there is no room for the distinction between the physical and the metaphysical. In the poetic cosmography which is associated with this the same concepts are likewise conflated with the result that the limits of the physically existent (for poetic man, the sky) is at once also the limit of the metaphysically existent, and as such the sky becomes the home of the gods. In conformity with this conflation, the home of the ungodly, the underworld, is identified with all areas under the skies.[2]

A knowledge of astronomy will be necessary to poetic men, for whom the taking of the auspices and the art of divination are important matters. But the movements of heavenly bodies will not be read as physical phenomena. Instead they will throw light on the aims and intentions of the gods.[3]

What all this amounts to is an insistence that it is useless to treat ancient conceptions of physics, cosmography or astronomy, some of which were the forerunners of respectable sciences today, as though in their origin they derived from, and are to be explained by, some scientific impulse in man, some innate desire to reach the truth for its own sake. Of course, most historians would recognise the non-scientific character of much of what passed for science in former days but they might still try to explain this as the result of a lack of technical resource and thus still explain man's behaviour in terms of a

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[1] N.S. Book II, Sections I and VII. [2] N.S. Book II, Section VIII.

[3] N.S. Book II, Section IX.

desire to find out the truth and a wish directly to control physical nature. Here, however, Vico has a warning to offer.

For, in the far-off era in which science first arose, if there was any sense in which man sought to control his environment it was not by an attempt to acquire direct physical control over it, for the very notion of direct physical control was ruled out under the conceptual conditions of the time.[1] His efforts must be interpreted in terms of a desire to 'read' what was going to happen and to influence the future by the offer of gifts and sacrifices to the gods.

(ii)

It is appropriate now to turn to the next division of subject matter mentioned by Vico in the Introduction to Book IV. "And in order" he writes, "that men, having reached the stage of human society, may on the one hand communicate to each other the aforesaid three most important matters (customs, laws and commonwealths), three kinds of languages and as many of characters are formed ....."[2]

We have already mentioned Vico's recognition of the historical importance of linguistic evidence.[3] What concerns us here is his insistence, in the sphere of language, upon the same requirement which underlies the interpretation of man's social achievements, i.e. the requirement that language be interpreted in such a way as to be seen to be grounded in, or explained by, human nature at the time.

It is this requirement which explains Vico's insistence that the element of conventional definition would require abilities beyond the nature of primitive man.[4] What, then would be the characteristics of the language of poetic man?

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[1] N.S. 182. [2] N.S. 915. [3] See Chapter VIII above. [4] N.S. 444.

The key to Vico's celebrated answer is to be found in Elements LVII to LIX.

In Element LVII Vico writes: "Mutes make themselves understood by gestures or objects that have natural relations with the ideas they wish to signify."[1] To this he adds two claims: "This axiom is the principle of the hieroglyphs by which all nations spoke in the time of their first barbarism".[2] And: "It is also the principle of the natural speech which Plato (in the Cratylus).....guessed to have been spoken in the world at one time..... This natural speech must have been succeeded by the poetic discourse of images, similes, comparisons and natural properties".[3]

It is easy enough to see the nature of the language Vico is describing here; what is more obscure is the nature of the argument implied in the axiom itself. Does Vico's reference to what mutes do mean that he wishes to argue from what mutes do to what primitive man must have done? And if so why should he think that the one follows from the other? Or is he merely saying that a study of how mutes converse will give us a key to how poetic man proceeded? In the light of what was shown in the last chapter about the logical structure of Vico's arguments, we can legitimately discard the first suggestion, that the behaviour of mutes somehow offers a proof or corroboration of a historical hypthesis. We may instead accept the second suggestion, which offers it as an interpretative key to our understanding of past language. Read thus Vico's point is that, as a result of our knowledge of how the mute proceeds today, we may hazard the suggestion that primitive man expressed himself, in that era of language which preceded the language of conventional meaning, by "gestures or objects that have natural relations with the ideas they wish to signify."

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[1] N.S. 225. [2] N.S. 226. [3] N.S. 227.

Vico reinforces this insight by two others. In Element LVIII he writes: "Mutes utter formless sounds by singing, and stammerers by singing teach their tongues to pronounce".[1] This is followed by the claim that "men vent great passions by breaking into song, as we observe in the most grief-stricken and the most joyful".[2]

Our suggestion about the function of these elements is confirmed by the corollary to Element LIX. Here Vico writes, of the two axioms just quoted, that they " - supposing that the founders of the gentile nations had wandered about in the wild state of dumb beasts and that, being therefore sluggish, they were inexpressive save under the impulse of violent passions - (lead to the conjecture that) their first languages must have been formed in singing".[3]

The effect of these two elements is to introduce the conjecture, or hypothesis, that the main function of the vocal element in the pre-verbal language of poetic man is, as it would now be described, to express emotion in song. Vico's suggestion is that poetic man "vents" his emotions in song.

In this way Vico puts forward what must be taken as the hypthesis that there are three main elements in the pre-verbal language of poetic man - the use of gestures and of objects which are "naturally" related with certain ideas he wished to signify, and vocal utterance as the natural expression of emotion. But how, one might wonder, were intellectual ideas expressed? The question does not arise, for poetic man had no intellect worthy of the name.

There is another dimension to Vico's conception of the language of poetic man. To understand this we must again recollect Vico's claim that a true account of any institution and hence of language, at any stage in its development must show that institution to be grounded in, and appropriate to,

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[1] N.S. 228. [2] N.S. 229. [3] N.S. 230.

man's nature at the time.[1] In the case of poetic man this means that it must be the sort of language which would arise naturally for the man of sense and passion, whose beliefs and ways of acting centred on an imaginative and theological view of the universe and his place in it.

What functions would language have in such a world? Vico describes it, in his summary in Book IV, as "a divine mental language by mute religious acts or divine ceremonies, from which there survived in Roman civil law the actus legitimi which accompanied all their civil transactions. This language belongs to religions by the eternal property that it concerns them more to be reverenced than reasoned, and it was necessary in the earliest times when men did not yet possess articulate speech".[2]

Vico gives this language essentially the character of an activity, in referring to its "mute religious acts" and its "divine ceremonies". His reference to the survival of these actions into Roman civil law is interesting but should not mislead us. He does not mean, as in the case of the Roman civil law, that these acts accompanied certain linguistic activities; he means that in the age of poetic man they were themselves linguistic activities. But the character of these activities is dictated by the human and social context in which they have this usage.

Another aspect of language is written as against gestured and spoken language. The interpretation of pre-written language must also conform to the same requirement as that of spoken and gestured language. The divine language of poetic man will therefore have its appropriate character - the hieroglyph; the essential feature here will be that it is also naturally related to what it represents, expresses or performs. Vico's own examples are fanciful but the

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[1] See Axioms VIII, XIV and XV. [2] N.S. 929.

following quotations will reveal something of their nature. In the "Chronological Table" in Book I, we find the following entry regarding Idanthyrsus, king of Scythia:

> "This king answered Darius the Great, who had threatened to make war on him, with five real words (which as we shall show later, the first peoples must have used before they came to vocal words and finally to written ones). These words were a frog, a mouse, a bird, a ploughshare and a bow for shooting arrows. Further on we shall show the natural and proper meaning of these objects".[1]

When we turn to Chapter IV of Book II on Poetic Wisdom, in which Vico explains the origins of hieroglyphs, we find the following account:

> "These five were a frog, a mouse, a bird, a ploughshare and a bow. The frog signified that he, Idanthyrsus, was born of the earth of Scythia as frogs are born of the earth in summer rains, and so that he was a son of that land. The mouse signified that he, like a mouse, had made his home where he was born; that is, that he had established his nation there. The bird signified that in that place he had his auspices: that is, that, as we shall see, he was subject to none but God. The ploughshare signified that he had reduced those lands to cultivation, and thus tamed them and made them his own by force. And finally the bow signified that as supreme commander of the arms of Scythia he had the duty and might to defend her. This explanation, so natural and necessary, is to be set against the ridiculous ones worked out, according to St. Cyril, by the counsellors of Darius. Add to the interpretation of the Scythian hieroglyphics by Darius's counsellors the far-fetched, artificial and contorted interpretations by scholars of the Egyptian hieroglyphics, and it will be evident that in general the true and proper use of hieroglyphics by the first peoples has hitherto not been understood. As for the Latins, Roman history has not left us without such a tradition; witness the mute heroic answer which Tarquinius Superbus sends to his son in Gabii when, in the presence of the messenger, he cuts off the heads of the poppies with the stick he has in his hands. In Northern Europe, as Tacitus observes in describing their customs, the ancient Germans were not acquainted with the secrets of letters; that is, they did not know how to write their hieroglyphics....."[2]

Apart from its value as an illustration of how Vico conceived the fore-

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[1] N.S. 99. [2] N.S. 435.

runner of written language, there are a number of points of interest which may be made concerning this passage. We might note, first, Vico's claim that his explanation is "natural and necessary" as against "the ridiculous" alternatives. Now Vico's explication of Idanthyrsus' language is far from simple nor has it any appeal on the grounds of immediate plausibility. It seems unlikely that he himself would expect it to recommend itself on this ground. When he claims that it is "natural" he cannot mean that it is natural to us, but must mean that it is natural in the circumstances i.e. that it can be seen to follow from, and be fully explained by, the sort of reason we have earlier considered. We can see, in fact, that at least two of the "real words" are interpreted in conformity with features of the poetic way of life with which we have already met: the "mouse" in conformity with the suggestion that poetic man is no longer a nomad and has now some customs based on recognition of heredity, and the "bird" in conformity with his reliance on the taking of the auspices as a means of communication with the gods.

We must note next that there are two reasons why Vico expects his suggestions to be accepted. They are, first, "natural and necessary" as against the "far-fetched, artificial and contorted" interpretations which other scholars have produced of Egyptian hieroglyphics. Vico can make this claim because in interpreting this language in accordance with principles supplied by the "ideal eternal history" he has ensured that the interpretation should take into account the intimate connection between all the various activities of a certain kind of man.

But this, though necessary, is not sufficient. We must note also the widespread nature of Vico's corroborative evidence. That an unwritten language

of natural hieroglyphs must have preceded the language of written hieroglyphs is supported not merely by the fact that on that supposition we can make sense of the doings of Idanthyrusus but also because by means of it we can make sense of the doings of Tarquinius, of the Germans and, for the passage continues beyond my quotation, of French, Mexican and Scottish history.

This suggests that Vico is trying to establish his principles of interpretation as laws. In effect he is arguing that a hypothesised principle of historical interpretation can be accepted satisfactorily as such only if it can be applied successfully to a large enough number of actual histories as to give it the status of a law. This is a very strong requirement indeed. We shall discuss later whether Vico needs anything as strong.[1]

(iii)

We may now turn to the third general category into which, in his summary in Book IV, Vico divides the various elements of the social life. This category arises in order that men may "justify" their customs and laws and consists in "three kinds of jurisprudence assisted by three kinds of authority and three kinds of reason in as many of judgments".[2]

There is no need to go into this at all fully for the general character of Vico's view is now clear. As one might expect, the jurisprudence of poetic man cannot be a rational jurisprudence. For one who believes that everything is a direct creation of God and is largely under his direct control, jurisprudence will take the form of a justification of certain types of activity by showing them to be directly ordered by God and the prohibition of others by showing them to be impious. Thus in the life of poetic man the taking of the auspices will occupy that place which, in later ages, will be occupied by a more rational set of procedures.[3]

Again in the world of poetic man there will be no place for later

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[1] See Chapter XVIII below. [2] N.S. 914. [3] N.S. 938.

conceptions of the role of authority e.g. of the conception of authority which bases itself "on the trust placed in persons of experience, of singular prudence in practical matters, and of sublime wisdom in intellectual matters".[1] In the poetic age authority also rests with the gods and their interpreters and its decisions are accepted without comprehension of its real nature by the people.[2]

Finally such men can have no conception of reason in practical affairs, i.e. the ability to accept a certain practical rule or code of conduct because they can see it to be necessary, useful or generally advantageous in the long run. In their world the place which will later be taken by reason is taken by authority i.e. by appeal to those who are held to have wisdom in practical affairs, the gods. For early man the functions of reason and authority in practical matters coalesced.[3]

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[1] N.S. 942. [2] N.S. 944. [3] N.S. 948.

CHAPTER XV

The Construction of the Ideal Eternal History

The Genetic Pattern

It has been shown that there are two aspects of the "ideal eternal history". These derive from Vico's two requirements, that to understand the nature of society and of social change an account both of the rationale of its institutional framework and of the historically conditioned nature of the latter be given. The factors involved here are necessarily related; we may discuss them separately for reasons of convenience but we cannot reach an adequate conception of the nature of society and of social change without understanding their relationship.

This view has been reinforced by the discussion of the first type of pattern in the "ideal eternal history". The important feature here has been the emphasis on the close relation between description and explanation in history: our descriptions explain because our selection of what should be described is governed by our conception of what sorts of things explain other sorts of things, a conception which is written into the "ideal eternal history".

We can see, however, that while we can explain both the genesis and the character of an institution by describing the context in which it arose and can do the same for the context itself we cannot reach a fully sufficient explanation until a self-evident explanatory feature is reached. Vico finds this in the psychology of the people, taking an account of this to be an intelligible yet ultimate explanation beyond which it would be senseless to enquire. Thus

any attempt to understand the pattern in cross-section at any specific point would have to rest upon an understanding of human nature at that phase of its development.

But this will not give us a fully sufficient explanation unless we can understand the historical conditioning factors which have made human nature what it is. It is thus impossible in principle to achieve a full explanation of social change unless we can also give a genetic account of the development of human nature.

The discussion in the last two chapters of the pattern in cross-section can therefore not be taken as a complete account of the sort of explanation Vico wishes to insist upon. It has been first an account of the nature of human activity traced over a relatively short period of time i.e. within a period of time whose events could be explained by reference to the one sort of human nature. It has also been an account of that which could be explained by the first sort of human nature. To take it as containing in principle all the elements which Vico thinks are involved in the understanding of social change would be defective in two ways. It would fail to bring out factors whose importance is only revealed by a consideration of the long-term pattern he claimed to descry in history. It would also fail to give a proper account of those kinds of social activity whose explanation involved not only a reference to their relation to the over-all structure of society but also to their own previous states since, by definition, there would be none of these.

These defects must now be remedied. We commence with the second, the nature of the relation between different historical stages of the same institution or type of activity. The principles of Vico's treatment of this can be dealt with briefly for they are to some extent the same as those we have already considered. In the account in the foregoing chapters it has come out that a type of activity or institution is to be explained by showing that it would

"naturally" have this character in view of man's other activities and beliefs. Vico uses this same notion of what is "natural" when talking of the conditions to which, for example, a history of the meanings of words must adhere. Etymology should "tell us the histories of the things signified by the words, beginning with their original and proper meanings and pursuing the natural progress of their metaphors according to the order of the ideas, on which the history of languages must proceed, as we have premised in the axioms".[1]

In effect this seems to do no more than insist that a history of the change in meaning of words should conform to the principles already investigated. At every stage of such a history the interpretation of the meanings of words must conform to the interpretation of man's total activities as governed by the nature of his ideas and, ultimately, of his mind.

But in fact something new is demanded here. As soon as we start to talk of the order of change in the case of any one kind of activity, and explain the order of change of all activity by reference to that of man's nature, we are committed to giving an account of the order of change as it applies to man's nature. We therefore see that a history of any one type of activity or institution (e.g. of methods of warfare, of the meanings of words or of economic and political practices) must conform to two requirements. Over a short stretch of time it must be explained by reference to man's other activities at the time, resting upon a certain sort of human nature. When attention is shifted to longer stretches of time the explanation must take account of developments in human nature itself.

To see how Vico deals with this we turn to consider the long-term pattern he claimed to descry in history. Immediately, however, we come upon a difficulty: Vico gives at least two accounts of the sequence of change involved in the

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[1] N.S. 354.

history of any nation. One of these we have already met with, when we mentioned Vico's account of the five natures of man, together with the dominant motivational characteristics of each nature and the various types of political organisation appropriate to them, as put forward in Element LXVII and those which follow it.[1] From this account we might think that the history of each nation falls into five distinct epochs, related by the fact that while the activities of man in any one epoch could be explained by his nature at that time, his nature at that time could only be explained by reference to the preceding epoch.

But Vico writes also as though the history of any one nation falls into three distinguishable epochs. This is most clearly revealed in the summary of the "ideal eternal history" in Book IV, with its sections entitled "Three Kinds of Natures", "Three Kinds of Customs", "Three Kinds of Natural Law", "Three Kinds of Government", and so on. Here Vico applies the division into three historical epochs to a variety of the elements of the social life as he conceives it.

In his actual practice, however, Vico fails to adhere to either classificatory scheme. For example, in the fivefold scheme, with its five types of human nature and dominant motivational characteristics, one might expect Vico to present us with five paradigm figures. Instead, he presents us with six such figures.[2] Again, the titles of the sections of Book IV suggest that in the "ideal eternal history" there are three kinds of government associated with three kinds of natures. There is the theocratic government appropriate to theocratic or poetic man; there is the aristocratic government appropriate to the heroic nature of poetic man's successor; and there is human government appropriate to the fully human, or intelligent, man who succeeds heroic man. But in practice, it

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[1] See Chapter XI above. [2] N.S. 243.

turns out that two forms of government are appropriate to human man. Vico vacillates between thinking of these as alternative and as successive types of government. But on either reading the simple trichotomy, with one type of government appropriate to each type of nature, has failed to be applied.

Another example of this same inability to adhere to the threefold classification of historical epochs is to be found in Vico's discussion of the languages of poetic and heroic man. Vico sometimes uses the adjective "poetic" when referring to matters appropriate to the first stage of development. In this sense "poetic" is to be distinguished from "heroic" which is applicable to the second stage. Yet when he gives his account of the stages of development of the Egyptian language he writes: "The second kind of speech, corresponding to the age of the heroes, was said by the Egyptians to have been spoken by symbols.... In consequence they must have been metaphors, images, similitudes or comparisons which, having passed into articulate speech, supplied all the resources of poetic expression".[1] And shortly afterwards he explicitly uses the terms as synonyms when he claims that "the heroic or poetic language was founded by the heroes".[2]

Vico's failure to adhere to these large-scale divisions suggests that they are perhaps intended to be primarily divisions of convenience rather than divisions fundamental to his account of the "ideal eternal history". There is no doubt that historians do find it convenient to have terms for referring to changes which occur in a pattern which only reveals itself over a long period of history. On this view the 'three natures' terminology would be used for referring to a kind of change which only revealed itself over a large part of

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[1] N.S. 438. [2] N.S. 443.

the nation's history and the 'five natures' terminology would be a more specific language for discussing the pattern as it revealed itself over rather shorter stretches of history. The position might be like that of an historian who finds it convenient to talk of say, the difference between the medieval mind and the renaissance mind when wishing to draw attention to changes in mental outlook and belief which can only be made clear by considering a large period of history but who also finds it convenient to talk of the difference between the thirteenth and fourteenth century mind when wanting to discuss less marked changes arising over a smaller period of history.

If one took such a view of "The New Science" one would have to be careful to distinguish between the claim that a nation's history does not fall into three or five significantly different epochs and the claim that it had no discernible pattern at all. If we said that the large-scale classificatory divisions are matters of convenience, that they are useful in that they enable us to refer to parts of the pattern in different ways according to our needs, this would not be to say that no significant pattern exists at all at any level of history and the question would arise: at what level does the pattern exist?

In fact this solution serves only to bring out a major ambiguity in "The New Science" and one which to some extent must be resolved. For the above view appears to be inconsistent with the theory of historical explanation we have attributed to Vico. We have argued that it is implicit in his procedure that the kinds of activities which are exemplified in history can only be fully explained when shown to be related to certain kinds of human nature. And if, as his explicit language suggests, these kinds of human nature are significantly different it follows that there is a philosophical ground for the distinction

into three or five epochs, that ground being provided by the division of human nature into three or five different kinds. The latter divisions can hardly then be looked on as distinctions of convenience.

We may put the difficulty in the following way. If we say that the large-scale division into epochs and corresponding types of human nature is in the end merely a matter of convenience we can reconcile the existence of two or more such systems of classification. But if we take this view can we also claim that such explanations as are to be afforded by these arbitrary divisions are true? It seems not. We need some reasoning or argument to show that the nature of human activity is susceptible of explanation on these lines. And if this were available the divisions would become more than a matter of mere convenience. On the other hand, if we hold that we can justify the application of these large-scale divisions to the history of social activity because we can show them to relate to certain fundamental factual truths about man's nature we can claim that the explanations they afford are true. But how, on this view, are we to reconcile the existence of two sets of fundamental truths concerning man's nature? What is raised here is the question of the status of these "kinds of natures" to which Vico alludes and of their relationship both to one another and to those other human activities which are explained by them.

We must note first that it is Vico's view that although, given the nature of poetic man, it is necessary that his subsequent activities should have their particular character which can therefore be explained by his nature, there is no way of explaining that nature itself. In the hierarchy of levels of explanation it is ultimate. It is therefore inexplicable, though not unintelligible.

The question now arises: are we to attribute this same character to those other human natures which Vico adduces in the course of his three-fold

and five-fold divisions of the pattern of human development? Is "heroic" nature, like "poetic" nature, an ultimate explanatory feature which can be used in explanation but which itself cannot be explained? And is this true also of the "human" nature of the third stage of society?

Three unfortunate consequences ensue should we adopt this view. First, as already mentioned, we must choose between the fivefold and three-fold divisions of man's nature. They cannot both be true.

Second, it follows that if the three kinds of natures are the ultimate, inexplicable basis of explanation then, though we explain the development of social activity by reference to them, these three features themselves fall outside the laws of historical, social development. We are thus precluded from giving an historical account of the development of man's nature in the way in which we can, for example, give an account of the development of his kinds of government or legal systems.

But can we even do the latter? The third consequence is that this is also now precluded. If we explain one legal system by showing how it developed from the activities of a certain type of nature and we explain how its precursor developed from a different and unrelated type of nature, we are no longer in a position to explain how the second type of legal system developed from the first. To do the latter we should require to know the principles which explain the development of the one kind of nature from the other; and if these kinds of natures are to be accepted as fundamental and inexplicable there can be no such principles.

The conclusion from this must be that to look upon man's nature throughout its career as ultimate and inexplicable is inconsistent with the type of explanation Vico wishes to offer for the growth of human social institutions. If the latter is necessarily historical in the sense that institutions can only,

and then must, occur under certain historical conditions, the same must be true of human nature itself.

That Vico did try to hold views involving the above inconsistency is suggested mainly by his artificial and over-precise attempts to summarise the structure of the "ideal eternal history" in some simple manner. Thus he talks of three kinds of natures from which spring three kinds of customs and natural law, giving the impression that not only are the three kinds of natures identically related to their kinds of custom and natural law but that they are identical in every way, logical status included.[1]

One might think that this represents Vico's view were it not for three considerations. In the first place, as we have already mentioned, in the history he writes Vico does not adhere to this simple trichotomy. He appears to find it difficult to decide where to draw the line between poetic and heroic or between heroic and human. Consequently a certain ambiguity seems to descend upon the terms themselves.

In the second place, Vico does not think of these terms as exclusively applicable to their own epochs. This is because he allows for considerable interpenetration of the institutions of one epoch with those of another, although, of course, the character of the institution will necessarily change in the course of this. We find for example, that the succession of forms of political states "admits of mixtures not of form with form (for such mixtures would be monsters) but of a succeeding form with a preceding government. All such mixtures are founded on the axiom above, that when men change they retain for some time the impression of their previous customs".[2] Yet, interpenetration of this sort ought to be impossible on the above view.

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[1] N.S. 915. [2] N.S. 1004.

The final and most important consideration, however, lies in the fact that there is to be found in "The New Science" the claim that human nature itself undergoes an historical development, together with an account of the principles of this process. This claim is incompatible with the view that the three or five types of human nature are to be thought of as ultimate, inexplicable facts.

One is not surprised to find a point of such importance receive some mention in the general elements. But before considering this it would be advisable to give a brief account of the way in which Vico envisages this development. The idea that man's nature undergoes a development in time has repercussions upon the interpretation of all his activities. Vico finds that these also develop in time. As an example of this we consider his account of the history of natural law.[1] In the summary of Book IV we are told that there are three kinds of law; "The first law was divine for men believed themselves and all their property to depend on the gods, since they thought everything was a god or made or done by a god."[2] This is followed by heroic law which is "a law of force, but controlled by religion which alone can keep force within bounds where there are no human laws or none strong enough to curb it. Hence providence ordained that the first peoples, ferocious by nature, should be persuaded by this their religion to acquiesce naturally in force, and that, being as yet incapable of reason, they should measure right by fortune, with a view to which they took counsel by auspicial divination".[3] The third "is human law dictated by fully developed human reason".[4]

Here the character of the law depends upon the nature of men. The latter evolves through two stages in which men are "as yet incapable of reason" to that in which there is "fully developed human reason". This third stage, that

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[1] Vico invariably refers to law as 'natural' law to emphasise its relation to society. Since he is not a natural law theorist in the sense that expression now has, it would be as well in what follows to omit the adjective 'natural'.

[2] N.S.922. [3] N.S. 923. [4] N.S. 924.

of the developed human reason, is one which is not fully described in "The New Science". Vico preferred to expend his energies upon more obscure periods of history. Nevertheless, it is necessary to grasp its nature if we are to understand the direction of man's development.

The history of law is expounded more fully in the concluding set of particular elements.[1] Here Vico offers a distinction between "strict law", which is the law of the first and second epochs of development, and "mild law", the law of the third epoch. The distinction now is between law which is applied according to its "certitude" and backed by authority, and that which is applied because it is what "impartial utility dictates in each case".[2] This distinction is fairly easy to grasp if we distinguish between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. Vico's contention then would be that, in the poetic and heroic ages, men, being unable to grasp the spirit of the law, applied the law as they received it from the gods or from the appointed authorities, as closely according to the letter as possible. This is the "certitude" of the law. Moreover, since at this stage they could not understand the spirit of the law, they accepted it only when the authority could enforce it.

Against this we are offered the later stage in which men accept the law because they can grasp its spirit, i.e. because they can understand its true function in civil life: "The natural equity of fully developed human law is a practice of wisdom in affairs of utility, since wisdom in its broad sense is nothing but the science of making use of things as their nature dictates".[3] In other words, equity (the spirit of the law) can operate effectively only when men are sufficiently rational to be able to understand the nature of law and to frame and accept law with this in mind. But to understand the nature of law

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[1] N.S.319-329. [2] N.S. 323. [3] N.S. 326.

much is required. Law has its nature because of the relationship between man and society. The nature of law cannot therefore be grasped until one can understand the nature of the relationship between man and society. Here the importance of the principle of historical relativity must not be over-looked. The laws which equity will enjoin will not be some set of immutable truths finally accessible to man's reason, but simply those laws which, now that the relationship of man to society is understood, are seen to be dictated by that relationship. Ignorance of this principle has led the natural law theorists to think that the spirit which informed the law of their own age is some sort of timeless essence which informs the law of all ages.[1]

The principle which Vico puts forward here is that there is a development in the history of law which is explained by a development of man's understanding of the relationship between himself and society, i.e. ultimately, of his own nature. The understanding which thus develops is, of course, not primarily the property of the individual per se, but of the individual in his social capacity. Vico talks of it as "the practice of wisdom" and wisdom, as we saw earlier, is nothing but the "common sense" of man, the public background of individual thought, as embodied in institutions and types of activity. Thus it is not man as an individual, or aggregate of individuals, who develops, but man as an essentially social being, whose nature is expressed in forms or types of social activity.

In these passages Vico also characterises the distinction as that between "the true" and "the certain", and refers to the use of these terms in this context as an application "to the particular matter of the natural law of nations (of) the two general definitions which treat of the true and the certain

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[1] N.S. 327 and 329.

in general with a view to conclusions in all the matters that are herein treated".[1]

Vico here refers to Elements IX and X, which we earlier concluded expressed an epistemological principle about the nature of the objects of belief and knowledge. Now we are referred to these axioms as embodying the principle of the historical development of man's understanding. The principle itself is stated in Element IX: "Men who do not know the truth of things try to reach certainty about them so that, if they cannot satisfy their intellects by science, their wills at least may rest on consciousness".[2] Earlier we related this axiom to Vico's account of the difference between the work of the philologian and of the philosopher. The former was concerned with particular facts "the certain", the latter with the universal and eternal, "the truth". In its new use, as a principle of interpretation, the axiom implies that the sort of knowledge that is put forward in "The New Science" is itself to be seen as a development from the concern with particular fact which is a dominant characteristic of the mind of certain ages. Applied, for example, to the history of law, the suggestion is that we should try to read that history as the development of the ability to use general rules embodying principles of equity and "impartial utility" from the ability to concern oneself only with the literal interpretation of authorised injunctions about how to proceed in specific cases.

We find therefore that Vico does put forward a claim concerning the principles of development of the human mind, i.e. of the types of things which minds did rather than of that which any one mind did. Put in a most general way, that claim is that the development of the mind proceeds from a stage in

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[1] N.S. 325. [2] N.S. 137.

which all it could do was imaginatively to objectify its own characteristics, and build of these the background for one sort of social world, to a stage in which it can understand itself, its needs and requirements, and so can create those institutions which will best satisfy these. The guiding principle of history is therefore the development of reason, i.e. the gradual emergence of the ability to think about, and understand the nature of, human activity, and the gradual growth of freedom from superstitious and imaginative ways of doing this.

It is most important to recall that this principle, which is concerned with the development of human understanding, is presented as a general principle and is then given a particular application to the history of law and to all the matters treated of in "The New Science".[1] It is clear from this that Vico thinks that human understanding, which is a part of human nature, is expressed in the law and in all those other matters. We should therefore be careful not to think of Vico's "human nature" as something over and above the law and customs of men. It is expressed in them and their history is its history. It cannot therefore be thought of as existing separately from them. When we refer to it separately this must therefore be taken as a device for talking about certain characteristics - a kind of unity or a kind of development - which they exhibit.

Once this is seen the difficulties over the relationship of the three kinds of natures to each other and to the other kinds of human activities soon remove themselves. If man's nature is not something over and above his types of activity the demand that the latter should "arise" from the former is not a demand to show a connection between two kinds of things but a demand that one kind of thing be thought of in a certain way. The requirement that, for

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[1] N.S. 325.

example, the customs of poetic man should arise from his poetic nature involves nothing more than that his customs be interpreted as having their rationale in an imaginative view of the world. The demand that the customs of fully human man should "arise" from his intelligent nature is the demand that our interpretation of his customs be based upon the premise that he understands his own nature and therefore understands why he should freely accept the social life and, furthermore, accept it in one form rather than another.

Vico's principle is really a request for the introduction of certain principles of consistency and unity into the interpretation of the social life of a people. We see man's nature itself develop as we see his institutions, types of activity and ways of thinking develop. But the latter develop according to a necessary order. So too must the former. The second and third kinds of nature therefore develop necessarily from the first and are thus not the inexplicable basis of explanation they might otherwise seem to be. The first kind of nature is the only inexplicable element which need be brought into the ideal scheme or into historical explanation. Hence far from being some extra-historical hypothesis in terms of which we might try, but fail, to explain the development of society, Vico's later "kinds of natures" are themselves conditioned by the necessarily historical process.

If this is granted the way is further opened for accepting the earlier explanation for reconciling the three-fold and five-fold divisions both of society and of man's nature. If the process of change and development through which society and man's nature develop is equally necessary, there is no room left for the gaps in explanation which would be left if we accepted the three-fold and five-fold types of nature as historically inexplicable facts. Explanation

must conform to Vico's ideal and development be seen to occur "by a constant and uninterrupted order of causes and effects present in every nation...."[1] The three-fold and five-fold divisions of men's nature cannot be thought of as interrupting this sequence. They are instead convenient ways of referring to the different characteristics it reveals when considered over shorter or longer sections of its full course.

It may seem an objection to this view that if we accept it we shall find it difficult to make much sense of the notion of a pattern in history. This does not follow. It is certainly true that if the three and five natures are not to be thought of as the ultimate determinants of history we cannot find the pattern by appealing to them. We must therefore look elsewhere for it. But we have not far to look. The pattern is revealed in the sequence of stages of development of human activity established deductively in the "ideal eternal history". This has the character of continuous and gradual development ("through a constant and uninterrupted order of causes and effects") which would be impossible were the different kinds of human natures taken to be the ultimate, inexplicable determinants of that development. The process as traced by Vico is far too continuous to fall neatly into three or five different sections; hence Vico's difficulties in deciding how to relate the detailed process of development of the pattern itself, and the actual events of history which are instances of this, to his larger but over-precise classificatory schemes.

My suggestion therefore comes to this. The ultimate determinant of history is human nature but it is human nature conceived of as expressing itself through the different kinds of human activities, not as something over and above these. It is moreover a human nature which develops historically i.e. which is affected

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[1] N.S. 915.

by its own previous states, and which, as it develops, brings about a development of those kinds of activities in which it expresses itself.

This development is a continuous and gradual process and in it there is no one-to-one correspondence between the distinguishable stages of development of the different kinds of human activity. These develop parallel to one another and as affected by one another. Because they are equally expressions of human nature their character will be found to be affected by the same underlying mental tendencies but since they are also different kinds of activities it is not to be expected that a distinguishable change in one will be accompanied by a corresponding change in all the others. The number of distinguishable stages which will occur in the history of any one kind of activity will depend as much upon the nature of the activity as upon the changes which occur in human nature.

It is nevertheless convenient to have terms for referring to certain longer and shorter term characteristics which can be seen to occur in the course of the development of different kinds of activities as a result of the fact that they are all explained by the same principles of human nature. The language of three and five natures, if not applied too schematically, can supply these and serve to call attention to the basic unity in any period of history.

In concluding this account of the nature of the "ideal eternal history" we have discovered that the informing principle of Vico's long-term pattern of history is the development of man's ability to have knowledge rather than belief. As such it represents the application to the history of man's nature of what Vico took to be a well-founded epistemological distinction. This prompts the question: did Vico think that because it is well-founded as an epistemological distinction it must for this reason be true as a principle of historical

interpretation? And this in turn is part of the larger question: why did Vico think we should accept any of his principles as the basis for historical interpretation?

CHAPTER XVI

The Proofs

In the course of the foregoing examination of Vico's version of the "ideal eternal history" it has been suggested that the procedure he adopts is a form of the hypothetico-deductive method.[1] This gives a plausible interpretation of the rather obscure remarks Vico made in the "Elements" about the rapprochement of philosophy and philology. In doing so, however, it lays considerable importance upon the question of empirical confirmation and it may seem that I have emphasised the latter factor more than Vico. To see whether this is so and to decide finally how Vico conceives the relation of model to fact we turn to the question of proof.

The notion of a proof is introduced, but not defined, in Book I, Section IV, entitled "Method". Three kinds are distinguished: "divine proofs"[2] or "sublime proofs of natural theology"[3]; "logical proofs"[4] or "philosophic proofs"[5]; and "philological proofs".[6].

The notion of a "sublime proof of natural theology" is brought in at the end of a section in which Vico argues that his Science must provide, in one of its aspects, "a rational civil theology of divine providence."[7] By this he means no more than that it must trace the intelligible workings of providence in the sphere of human activity. He then writes: "In contemplation of this eternal providence our Science finds certain proofs by which it is confirmed and demonstrated. Since divine providence has omnipotence

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[1] See Chapter XIII above. [2] N.S. 343. [3] N.S. 346. [4] N.S. 346.
[5] N.S. 351. [6] N.S. 351. [7] N.S. 342.

as minister, it develops its orders as easily as the natural customs of men. Since it has infinite wisdom as counsellor, whatever it establishes is order. Since it has for its end its own immeasurable goodness, whatever it ordains must be directed to a good always superior to that which men have proposed to themselves".[1]

The categories to which he appeals are "the aforesaid naturalness, order and end (the preservation of the human race)."[2] It is clear that what these categories, if successfully applied, will show is that we are entitled to make use of the notion of divine providence.

This is most easily seen if we again distinguish between the transcendent and the immanent aspects of divine providence. As regards its transcendent aspect Vico appears to be producing his version of the argument from design. His claim here is that we are entitled to call the pattern identified in "The New Science" the work of a divine agency because it exhibits the above characteristics. This argument is incidental to "The New Science".

At the other level, however, Vico is arguing that we are justified in speaking of the operations of providence in its immanent aspect when we find that these three characteristics are present. If this is what Vico means we should also expect a justification for the introduction of these three, as against other, characteristics. This, in fact, is forthcoming. But Vico gives first a fuller account of the three criteria in operation. The "naturalness" is exhibited "when we reflect with what ease things are brought into being, by occasions arising far apart and sometimes quite contrary to the proposals of men, yet fitting together of themselves".[3]

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[1] N.S. 343. [2] N.S. 344. [3] N.S. 344.

Order is exhibited when we "compare the things with one another and observe the order by which those are now born in their proper times and places which ought now to be born, and others deferred for birth in theirs..."[1] Purpose is exhibited when it is not possible that "in these occasions, places and times we can conceive how other divine benefits could arise by which, in view of the particular needs and ills of men, human society could be better conducted or preserved".[1]

It will be noticed that nothing here affords a proof of anything immanent. It is at best only an account of the categories which Vico relates to the immanent. Before we reach a proof we should require also a justification for the introduction of these categories. Vico now provides this. "Thus the proper and consecutive proof here adduced" he writes, "will consist in comparing and reflecting whether our human mind, in the series of possibilities it is permitted to understand, and as far as it is permitted to do so, can conceive more or fewer or different causes than those from which issue the effects of this civil world".[2]

The justification lies in Vico's claim that by means of the application of these categories, and only by means of it, can we understand the growth of society. Despite its theological ring there is nothing inherently mysterious in Vico's notion of a sublime proof. Its essence is nothing other than to argue that we are justified in bringing in certain descriptive and explanatory categories, which Vico refers to as the operations of providence, because by means of them we can arrive at the only possible understanding of the whole subject matter of the human past and human nature.

In the above quotation Vico suggests that it is impossible to "conceive" of any other explanation of the whole of human history. The sense of "conceive"

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[1] N.S. 344. [2] N.S. 345.

here must not be misunderstood. Clearly, he does not mean to refer to what is logically or conceptually possible. The sense in which other accounts do not deal with what is possible is that sense which we explained earlier in our account of the philosophical reasoning by which Vico tries to prove, for example, that society cannot progress without the institution of marriage. There the impossibility was seen in the light of a theory about human nature. In the same way Vico is not saying here that it is absolutely impossible to conceive that the causes of human history are different from those he advocates but that we cannot apply those other causes, consistently with our theory of human nature, and still explain the whole of human history.

There is, therefore, nothing of the a priori in Vico's conception of a sublime proof. Such a proof will be afforded if we find in our actual practice that the notions of naturalness, order and purpose are necessary for the complete description and explanation of the growth of human nature.

The next proofs Vico mentions are the "logical"[1] or "philosophic".[2] Vico's remarks here are unfortunately obscured by his combining an account of the nature of such a proof with an account of the method to be followed to secure it. Moreover, he seems to have a variety of such proofs in mind. He starts, for example, by suggesting that we have a "logical" proof when we succeed in explaining "the particular ways in which they (things) came into being, that is to say, their nature, the explanation of which is the distinguishing mark of science. And finally (these proofs) are confirmed by the eternal properties (the things) preserve, which could not be what they are if the things had not come into being just as they did, in those particular times, places and fashions, which is to say with those particular natures,

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[1] N.S. 346. [2] N.S. 351.

as we have set forth in two axioms".[1]

The claim here is that we have a logical proof if we can reveal the nature of an institution or set of institutions. But the nature of an institution is that in it which is universal and eternal and this can only be demonstrated if we can show it as an example of a universal and necessary pattern. It is therefore not surprising that Vico's next proof should refer to the "ideal eternal history", which is an account of such a pattern:

> "The decisive sort of proof in our Science is this: that, once these orders were established by divine providence, the course of the affairs of the nations had to be, must now be and will have to be such as our Science demonstrates, even if infinite worlds were produced from time to time through eternity, which is certainly not the case.
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> "Our Science therefore comes to describe at the same time an ideal, eternal history traversed in time by the history of every nation in its rise, progress, maturity, decline and fall. Indeed, we go so far as to assert that whoever meditates this Science tells himself this ideal eternal history only in so far as he makes it by the proof 'it had, has and will have to be'."[2]

A logical or philosophical proof is afforded here by a demonstration of the universal and necessary character of that sequence which is traced in the "ideal eternal history". We have seen how Vico attempts to demonstrate such necessity and universality, by means of philosophical reasoning in which deductions were drawn from factual hypotheses about man's nature. There is no hint of the a priori in the sense of the purely conceptual here, but equally the procedure is not straight forwardly empirical. Theory is used and this is what makes the whole thing 'philosophical'.

Vico next refers to the third type of proof, the "philological". In

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[1] N.S. 346. [2] N.S. 348.

Paragraphs 352 to 358 he puts forward a list of the different kinds of such proofs. Philological proofs are given when we succeed in showing that "our mythologies agree with the results of our meditations, not by force or distortion, but directly, easily and naturally;"[1] that the same can be said of the explanation of "heroic phrases"[2] and the "etymologies of native languages;"[3] that a "mental vocabulary of human social things" can be exhibited;[4] that a principle is provided whereby we can recover the original truth from false historical traditions; and that, when used in accordance with these principles, the great literary remains can be a source of knowledge.[5]

In all this the key notion is that the interpretation of historical knowledge fits in, "agrees", with the "results of our meditations", as embodied in the "ideal eternal history", not "by force and distortion but directly, easily and naturally". What this means is that in the "ideal eternal history" is embodied a set of historical hypotheses through which the historical evidence can be interpreted "directly, easily and naturally". The essence of a philological proof therefore lies in a practical demonstration that the hypotheses embodied in the "ideal eternal history" are confirmed by their ability to afford correct principles for the interpretation of historical evidence.

Finally Vico makes explicit the relationship between philosophy and philology which is implicit in these proofs. He writes:

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[1] N.S. 352. [2] N.S. 353. [3] N.S. 354. [4] N.S. 355. [5] N.S. 357.

> "These philological proofs enable us to see in fact the things we have meditated in idea concerning this world of nations, in accordance with Bacon's method of philosophising, which is 'think (and) see' (cogitare videre). Thus it is that with the help of the preceding philosophical proof, the philological ones which follow both confirm their own authority by reason and at the same time confirm reason by their authority."[1]

In this passage Vico claims to do that which, in Element X[2], he accused philosophers and philologians of failing to do. The fact he is referring to is the interpreted fact. Its truth is confirmed not merely because the evidence is susceptible of such an interpretation but also because philosophy, through theoretical argument, has shown the pattern which underlies this interpretation of the evidence to be necessary. This necessity was demonstrated by appeal to factual hypotheses and is therefore not conceptual. It follows that other hypotheses could be used to demonstrate other patterns. Hence it is also necessary to show that this pattern is the one according to which the evidence should be interpreted rather than any others. This is shown by the capacity of the pattern to afford a convincing interpretation of all the evidence, a capacity not shared with other possible patterns. Philosophy and philology thus confirm each other.

Vico's remarks in relation to this matter of proof, i.e. to the question why we should accept the findings of "The New Science", make it clear that he does not envisage the possibility of any a priori vindication of the pattern to which history conforms; he does not think there is any sense in which the acceptability of the pattern can be established independently of its bearing upon the historical evidence. It is impossible to reconcile Croce's remark that factual confirmation is "strictly speaking superfluous" with the

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[1] N.S. 359. [2] N.S. 140.

above account of the different kinds of philological proof.

We can, however, raise the question: what level of factual confirmation is relevant here? Vico's pattern, as we have seen, traces only the general outlines of the development of a nation and it is this which is offered as the key to the understanding of actual history. We can allow that the broad outline may be correct even if Vico, in his capacity as an historian, makes some mistakes of detail when interpreting historical evidence in accordance with it. What must be the case, however, if the pattern is to be confirmed, is that the evidence must support an interpretation of the broad outline of the nation's history which is as suggested by the pattern. There is therefore no need for Vico to be upset if in his actual history he makes mistakes of detail. It is only when it becomes difficult to interpret the broad outline of a nation's history that it becomes necessary to reconsider the model to see how it should be modified to meet this situation.

This does not, however, quite settle the question for there is a relation between detailed history and general history. Vico obviously agrees that this is so; he often disputes questions of detail with other historians on the ground that their detailed interpretation is not consistent with any plausible general account of the period in question. It follows from this that the "ideal eternal history" has a bearing upon the details of history through its more direct relation to the general outline of history. Even if Vico could allow for some difficulties of interpretation at the detailed level without abandoning his account of the general outline of history it would still be the case that if the only plausible interpretations of detailed history consistently conflicted with the general account of history suggested by the "ideal eternal history" we should have to reconsider the latter. This is because Vico's account of the broad out-

line of history rests upon a theory about the deep-lying, conditioning factors behind social change. The historian may investigate detailed matters of which there is no explicit mention in the "ideal eternal history" but in giving his account of these he cannot avoid making assumptions about the public background of thought, custom, institution and accepted kinds of activities in which these take place. Where the general history provided by the "ideal eternal history" provides an acceptable background for much detailed investigation this constitutes a form of confirmation for it. Where it becomes impossible consistently to carry through detailed investigation based upon it this becomes a reason for reconsidering it.

It follows from this, although Vico does not himself make the point, that the possibility of deciding between different "ideal eternal histories" is available, for their differences will eventually issue out in historical theories which are detailed enough for historians to be able to decide between them. It follows further that not only should one thus be able to decide between different "ideal eternal histories" (i.e. between different ideal models which take human nature as the ultimate historical determinant) but also between these and other philosophical theories of history which, starting from different accounts of the determining factors of history, recommend different models for its interpretation. Vico is open to this form of assessment because, as has been shown, his theory has the character of a scientific theory and, <u>mutatis mutandis</u>, can be tested accordingly.

CHAPTER XVII

Epistemology and "The New Science"

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It is now possible to reconsider the difficult question how Vico conceived the relationship between the enterprise carried out in "The New Science" and his fundamental epistemological principle. In the preliminary discussion of paragraphs 330 and 331 it was pointed out that Vico takes the consistency of his system to be a necessary but not sufficient condition of its truth.[1] For a sufficient condition he required also a relation to a "truth beyond all question: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men and that its principles are certainly to be recovered within the modifications of our own human mind. Whoever reflects on this cannot but marvel that the philosophers should have bent all their energies to the study of the world of nature, which, since God made it, He alone knows: and that they should have neglected the study of the world of nations or civil world, which since men had made it, men could hope to know."

In the light of the foregoing account of Vico's method and the nature of the confirmation involved in it we must now note a perplexing feature in the above claim. If Vico is advocating a version of the hypothetico-deductive method the appeal to the epistemological principle should be superfluous, for the hypothetico-deductive method correctly applied is normally taken to be

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[1] See Chapter I above.

sufficient to establish the truth of certain laws. This suggests that, unless he is merely confused, Vico is using the term 'knowledge' in a special sense here. This requires investigation.

Unfortunately the "truth beyond all question" to which Vico refers us in our search for a sufficient condition is obscure for we do not know what are "the modifications" of our human mind to which Vico is referring nor do we know what sort of a mind is "our own human mind" in which they exist. We are given some help here in the passage in which Vico begins his account of the religious beliefs of the first men. He writes:

> "From these first men, stupid, insensate and horrible beasts, all the philosophers and philologians should have begun their investigation of the wisdom of the ancient gentiles ..... And they should have begun with metaphysics, which seeks its proofs not in the external world but within the modifications of the mind of him who meditates it. For, as we said above, since this world of nations has certainly been made by man, it is within these modifications that its principles should have been sought. And human nature, so far as it is like that of animals, carries with it this property, that the senses are its sole way of knowing things.
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> "Hence poetic wisdom, the first wisdom of the gentile world, must have begun with a metaphysic not rational and abstract, like that of learned men now, but felt and imagined as that of these first men must have been, who, without power of ratiocination, were all robust sense and vigorous imagination, as established in the axioms ....."[1]

In this passage Vico reaffirms the necessity to find the principles of the world of nations "within the mind of him who meditates it". The principle which he then adduces is that "human nature, so far as it is like that of animals, carries with it this property, that the senses are its sole way of knowing things". In the remaining paragraphs of this section which we have already discussed, he goes on to argue that poetic men, in their ignorance,

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[1] N.S. 374-375.

"imagined the causes of the things they felt and wondered at to be gods" and "at the same time gave the things they wondered at substantial being ...."[1]

It was pointed out earlier that to arrive at these conclusions Vico uses principles expressed in the first two elements. These were, that "Because of the indefinite nature of the human mind, wherever it is lost in ignorance, man makes himself the measure of all things"; and, also a "property" of the human mind, "that whenever men can form no idea of distant and unknown things they judge them by what is familiar and at hand".

It is clear from the general nature of these propositions that Vico takes them to be applicable to man at all phases of his career. This is confirmed not only by the fact that he refers to them as "properties" of the humand mind but also by the fact that both the conceit of scholars and of the nations are alleged to derive from them.[2] Since these conceits have a history extending into Vico's own day it follows that these general principles are as true of the workings of the human mind in its later stages as they are of its workings in the poetic era.

Vico's "modifications" are therefore properties of the human mind. This confirms the suggestion made earlier that Vico's "modification" has that sense of "mode" in which the latter was part of traditional philosophical terminology.[3]

The Elements of "The New Science" contain many other examples of "modifications" which have not been mentioned because they have not been relevant to the short sections of the "ideal eternal history" I have traced. They form a network of propositions which enable Vico to arrive at a model by which to

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[1] N.S. 375. For the discussion of these passages, see Chapter XIII (ii) and (iii) above.

[2] See Chapter III above. [3] See Chapter VI above.

interpret the evidence. For example, Vico offers a list of those which lie behind his account of the activities of poetic man. The list is headed by a more explicit statement of the principles embodied in the first two axioms.[1] To this is added the claim that "it is a true property of the human mind which Tacitus points out where he says 'minds once cowed are prone to superstition'".[2] We read also that "wonder is the daughter of ignorance ....."[3] that "imagination is more robust in proportion as reasoning power is weak"[4] and that "curiosity ..... has the habit, whenever it sees some extraordinary phenomenon of nature, a comet for example, a sun-dog, or a mid-day star, of asking what it means".[5]

These are some of the propositions which underlie Vico's account of the nature and origin of early man's grotesque religious beliefs. Other sets of properties are offered to explain how historical traditions arise and in what manner they proceed to become false,[6] how ideas and names from being associated with particular things come to refer to classes and types of thing,[7] and how language arises. There is no need to extend this list since to do so would involve going through nearly all the Elements. The point is that Vico tries to offer an account of the properties of the human mind which will be sufficiently complete to explain all the human activities dealt with in "The New Science".

The last claim is not strong enough. Vico's problem is not merely to give an explanation of what happened. It is also to deduce an account of what happened. We have already seen him do this in our discussion of his account of the religious beliefs of poetic man. What now becomes clear in the light of that discussion is that the propositions embodying these "properties" of the

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[1] N.S. 180-182. [2] N.S. 183. [3] N.S. 184. [4] N.S. 185. [5] N.S. 189.
[6] N.S. 201-205. [7] N.S. 206-210.

human mind, must be sufficient to enable us to deduce an account of the sequence and nature of man's activities. If this is acceptable we shall then be able to claim both to have discovered and explained the nature of man's activities.

That this is what Vico means is confirmed by the second important passage in which he refers to his basic epistemological principle. He there writes:

> "Our Science therefore comes to describe at the same time an ideal eternal history traversed in time by the history of every nation in its rise, progress, maturity, decline and fall. Indeed we go so far as to assert that whoever meditates this Science tells himself this ideal eternal history only so far as he makes it by the proof 'it had, has and will have to be'. For the first indubitable principle above posited is that this world of nations has certainly been made by men, and its guise must therefore be recovered within the modifications of our own human mind. And history cannot be more certain than when he who creates the things also describes them. Thus our Science proceeds exactly as does geometry, which, while it constructs out of its elements or contemplates the world of quantity, itself creates it; but with a reality greater in proportion to that of the orders having to do with human affairs, in which there are neither points, lines, surfaces nor figures ..."[1]

We must note here the claim that "whoever meditates this Science tells himself this ideal, eternal history only so far as he makes it by the proof "it had, has and will have to be". The suggestion is that the "ideal eternal history" is only grasped or understood insofar as one can demonstrate the necessity for its various stages. We have earlier seen that there is no sense in which the stages of the "ideal eternal history" are conceptually necessary. They are necessary only in the sense that they must occur given the occurrence of certain prior conditions. What the reader of "The New Science" has therefore to be offered is an account in which the character of certain occurrences is

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[1] N.S. 349.

deduced from these prior factors. But this can only be done if certain general hypotheses about human nature are available and it is these which are provided by Vico's various properties and modifications of the human mind.

It will be useful to give as an example of this procedure the one argument of "The New Science" we have been able to look at in detail - the argument to discover and explain the metaphysical beliefs of poetic man.

The argument starts from the properties stated in the first two elements. These assert that "Because of the indefinite nature of the human mind, wherever it is lost in ignorance, man makes himself the measure of all things"[1] and "... that whenever men can form no idea of distant or unknown things, they judge them by what is familiar and at hand".[2]

These are alternative accounts of the way the human mind proceeds in areas of doubt. They are also exhaustive. In the light of these two features we may set up the following proposition: When men are ignorant of the cause of something and cannot even explain it by analogy with similar things they attribute their own nature to it. Vico himself does not bother to set out this last proposition. He moves instead to a yet more specific proposition which is entailed by it: "When men are ignorant of the natural causes producing things and cannot even explain them by analogy with similar things they attribute their own nature to them".[3] This is Axiom XXXII which, he says, "is embraced by the first (axiom)".

It is this principle which, in conjunction with the premise that poetic men could not understand the natural causes of things, leads to the conclusion Vico reaches: that poetic men "gave the things they wondered at substantial

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[1] N.S. 120. [2] N.S. 122. [3] N.S. 180.

being after their own ideas ....."[1]

In this way Vico deduces what must have occurred. It is this deductive relationship between the premises and the conclusions of "The New Science" which leads him to the claim that in understanding the "ideal eternal history" one must see that "it had, has and will have to be".

An important point concerning these "properties" or "modifications" is brought to light if we consider the following objection. If the properties are so general as to be applicable to all human natures everywhere, ought it not to be the case that human nature is everywhere the same? And if this is so what happens to the element of historical perspective so highly prized by Vico?

To appreciate Vico's position here we must note two points which come out in the above example. The first is that the conclusion is not directly deduced from the propositions in their most general form but from a more specific statement into which is written conditions which make it relevant to the matter in hand. In the above argument it is neither of the first two "general" elements which provide the major premise but the "more specific" Element XXXII.[2]

The second point is that although this premise has a temporal condition written into it we require another premise, that poetic man could not understand the natural cause of things, to know that the condition is satisfied. The question arises: what is Vico's warrant for asserting this second premise?

In view of the fact that Vico holds that none of this gives us knowledge until confirmed in relation to some evidence, it might seem that he could be

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[1] N.S. 375. [2] Compare N.S. 120 and 122 with N.S. 180-181.

content to try the hypothesis that poetic man did not understand the natural cause of things on an ad hoc basis. But were he to do this the whole notion of historical perspective would be lost. For it is of the essence of the latter that we be able to show that a human conception or type of activity is possible only at a certain phase in the development of human nature and not at any other. It is therefore absolutely necessary for Vico to try to produce a pattern of the development of human nature whose prior phases alone sufficiently explain the posterior and not merely a series of ad hoc hypotheses about changes which occur in human nature involving no explanatory pattern.

The hypothesis that poetic man did not understand the natural cause of things is therefore only permissible insofar as it is part of a larger theory in which is stated an intelligible order of development in human nature. Such is the theory which is stated in its most general form in Element IX[1] and described with varying degrees of specification in the sequences of three or five natures of men which Vico advances.[2]

We must now note that these two types of hypothesis, in which are presented suggestions about men's natural mental tendencies and the sequence of their development, provide the basis for the two necessary aspects of the "ideal eternal history" which we have already distinguished. In a sense there is nothing more in the conclusions of Vico's arguments, represented as the "ideal eternal history", than can be derived from the premises, consisting of his "principles", "properties" and "modifications" of human nature. This provides additional confirmation that the method by which the "ideal eternal

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[1] "Men who do not know the truth of things try to reach certainty about them, so that if they cannot satisfy their intellects by science their wills may rest on consciousness".

[2] See Chapter XV above.

history" is initially constructed is deductive.

(ii)

The question now arises: how are the principles from which the "ideal eternal history" is constructed themselves derived? In the passages we are considering Vico refers to them as being "recovered within the modifications of our own human mind". We have now seen what sorts of modifications he is talking about. In what sense, however, are they modifications of "our own human mind"?

The expression "our own human mind" is highly ambiguous. It could be used by Vico on the one hand to refer to his own individual mind, his own or any other New Scientist's individual mind, his own or any reader's individual mind; on the other hand it could be used to refer to some social mind, perhaps some body of knowledge, to which he, in his social or human capacity, has access.

The expression must therefore be interpreted in the light of our reading of the rest of Vico's work. This rules out any of the first set of suggestions, i.e. those which suggest he is referring to some individual mind *per se*. Two lines of reasoning support this claim.

First, if Vico is suggesting that the principles of history can be recovered from one's own individual mind, this is tantamount to suggesting that they are to be recovered by introspection. But we have seen what sorts of modifications Vico is referring to: some are properties of the mind at all stages of its development,[1] others reflect abilities and tendencies it has at certain stages only of its development[2] and others, again, present the order of its development.[3] Not only are there at least these three types

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[1] N.S. 120, 122, 137. [2] N.S. 211, 212, 215-217.

[3] N.S. 137, 218, 236, 242.

but also a large number of examples of each type. It seems inconceivable that anybody should think that all this could be discovered by introspection, i.e. by examination of one's own case.

Second, the whole tendency of Vico's philosophy has been to diminish the importance of the notion of the individual as a means of explaining the course of human affairs. It has stressed, instead, that man must be thought of in terms of various capacities and tendencies, themselves presupposing the primacy of social organisation and social relationships over the individual man. The character of the latter is largely determined by these factors rather than their character being determined by his.

In these circumstances it might seem that, since the individual man's human characteristics are examples of their social or human types or kinds, we could discover the nature of the latter by a study of onself. But even if this is so, since no individual man has all the possible capacities and tendencies and certainly not those of a former epoch, such a method could not discover all the principles or modifications adduced by Vico.

If "our own human mind" is not the individual mind as such, it must be the social or group mind, the only other sort which figures in Vico. We can have no introspective access to this but we can have some access to it nevertheless because we are part of it and therefore share in and can understand its characteristic features.

If we wish to deny that this access is introspective we must be careful not to jump to the opposite conclusion and pronounce it public, if by this we mean to imply that it is identical in all respects with the knowledge obtained in the natural sciences. Were we to do this we should fail to observe the point of Vico's complaint "that the philosophers should have bent

all their energies to the study of the world of nature which, since God made it, He alone knows; and that they should have neglected the study of the world of nations or civil world, which, since man had made it, man could hope to know".[1]

Here Vico wishes to reserve the term "knowledge" for that which is available to God in respect both of the world of nature and of nations and to men in respect only of the latter. Men can have no "knowledge" of "the world of nature".

To understand this we must recall that a cardinal feature of the knowledge offered in "The New Science" is to be found in the necessarily explanatory nature of the latter. In the case of the social, economic and political institutions with which "The New Science" is primarily concerned, such explanation is given by an account of those human needs and purposes which dictate the nature of man's activities. In the case of "the world of nations" men can reach such explanations; in the case of the world of nature God can reach them but men cannot. If one compares the accounts available to men in respect of these two worlds, it is clear that in the case of our knowledge of the natural world there is lacking a whole dimension, that of a certain kind of explanation, which is available in the case of the "human"world.

This distinction provides Vico's reason for wishing to deny that we can have knowledge of the world of nature and allow it only of the world of nations. It is clear from the account we have given of Vico's position that he does not think we need be any less rigorous in our conception of what is a law of human activity than we are of purely physical laws. From the point of view of their logical characteristics the two kinds of law are not to be distinguished: as products of science they equally have to do with "what is universal and

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[1] N.S. 331.

eternal".[1] The point of Vico's complaint that men cannot "know" the "world of nature" in the same way they can the "world of nations" cannot lie in any basic difference in the strength of the methods by which we confirm the kinds of hypothesis involved. It lies rather in the notion that the hypotheses are of different kinds and that there is a consequent difference in the way we understand them. Vico is suggesting that when we understand the nature of something by reference only to people's needs and purposes we attain the fullest kind of knowledge available to man.

Vico has undoubtedly chosen to put this point in a most unfortunate way. In discussing the passage quoted at the beginning of this chapter,[2] it was pointed out that Vico's appeal to his basic epistemological principle cannot be looked upon as a search for a sufficient condition of the truth of his theories. This is already supplied by his correctly conceived method. The fact that this principle has a bearing upon "human" knowledge and not upon physical knowledge cannot therefore show there is a difference between the two qua knowledge. It can only serve to distinguish between them as kinds of knowledge. Vico would have put this distinction much more satisfactorily had he, instead of trying to distinguish them as knowledge and non-knowledge, allowed that they were both knowledge but of differing kinds. The distinction should be between understanding and knowledge.

But if the knowledge derived from "the modifications of our own mind" is confirmed in largely the same way as that derived from the laws of the physical sciences, is it possible that Vico thinks we have access to "modifications" in just the same way as we have to the physical laws, i.e. by observation? This, also would be a false reading. For it is implicit in Vico's

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[1] N.S. 163. [2] N.S. 330-331.

general theory that in no case, not even that of the natural sciences, is knowledge gained by observation alone.

To appreciate this we have but to recall the account of the metaphysics of poetic man. There the character of all of man's beliefs, including his beliefs about metaphysics, physics, cosomography, astronomy and geography, was explained by his natural tendency to think in certain ways. Since all human activity is to be explained by recourse to features of human nature, it follows that even in the case of the history of the natural sciences, which Vico fails to trace, the character of the hypotheses of the natural sciences will be explained by the character of man.

It is implicit in such a view that there can never be a contrast between some "subjective" or introspective way in which, for example, we grasp the principles by which we understand other people's actions and an "objective" way in which we merely observe and report on, or describe, the material world. Our observation of the physical is governed by the natural ways, historically modified, in which we think just as much as is our explanation of the human. The mechanism of the two processes is the same; it is merely the actual categories involved which differ.

But if we do not gain knowledge of "the modifications of our own human mind" by observation alone then how do we gain it and how does it arise? Vico does not give the answer explicitly but it is clear enough that the answer he would offer must be on the same lines as his answer to these questions in respect of any knowledge whatsoever. As individuals we gain it in the course of the teaching and training by which we acquire that human nature which has developed at the time in which we live. The knowledge itself has grown in the course of the social development of human nature which Vico has traced for us. It is thus the product of a social and historical process in

which, through teaching and education and by reason of our own place in the social system, we can come to share.

It is not surprising, in view of this thesis, that Vico's "modifications" vary much in character. Some are nothing more than what Vico conceives to be widely held generalisations about human nature. Others, again, are explicitly taken from writers such as Tacitus,[1] Lactantius Firmianus[2] and Dio Cassius.[3] Others again seem to be generalisations suggested by Vico himself.

It might seem that there is something question-begging about the kind of answer I here attribute to Vico. Can we not, for example, still justifiably ask for an account of how Vico or Tacitus or the unknown individuals, from whom the most widely held generalisations must originally have sprung, derived their generalisations? And can we not expect something over and above an account of those historical and social forces which have helped shape the nature which, through education and social intercourse, these individuals have acquired?

That Vico's position should appear question-begging results not from his inability to give an answer to these questions but from the fact that his answer is necessarily uninformative. As we have seen, it is his contention that everything which requires explanation in "the world of nations" can be explained by reference to an historically and socially conditioned human nature. It is possible to ask what it is that is conditioned here in two senses: as applicable to the primitive man from whom Vico traces the course of a nation's history, and as applicable to a child in whom also one can trace the course of that social conditioning by which its nature is created. But in neither case is it, in fact, possible to produce an account of a pure, unconditioned nature

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[1] N.S. 183. [2] N.S. 188. [3] N.S. 308.

possessed before social conditioning has begun its work. Vico's "poetic" man is not a pre-social creature in whom we can find the unconditioned features upon which the social forces act. He is merely a very primitive or rude social type.[1] So we can know nothing of what characteristics he would have in a non-social context. Likewise in the case of the child we can have no knowledge of its characteristics before training, teaching and the educative effect of social intercourse, have taken their effect. Therefore, although it might seem that we should be able to ask for an account of that which is conditioned by the social forces in, for example, the case of an individual such as Tacitus or Vico himself, no more informative answer can be given than that nature which, when conditioned, was possessed by Tacitus or Vico; and this is not informative at all. In other words we can trace the stages of social and historical conditioning by which the nature of an individual or of a society is produced by reference to prior conditioned stages. But we can never reach anything not socially and historically conditioned.

Once we have appreciated this we shall stop asking such questions as "from whence, or how, are true generalisations initially derived?". The ability to form them is part of our human nature, at once natural in the sense that we do it spontaneously, and yet historically and socially conditioned in that we can only do it when our minds have been trained in certain necessarily social ways.

Vico's position is therefore not question-begging at all. If he cannot offer an answer to this kind of question it is because the latter falls beyond the limits prescribed by his theory of what can intelligibly be asked about those human abilities we possess and on which the framing of "The New Science"

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[1] Cf. N.S. 134, 135, 308, 309.

depends. God alone, as the maker of our unconditioned natures, would know in what terms to answer such a question.

(iii)

Finally it remains to state exactly how Vico conceives the nature of the relationship between "The New Science" and its basic epistemological principle, the "truth beyond all question". It is clear that the latter does not constitute a sufficient condition of the truth of the former. For we have seen from Vico's proofs that ultimately the truth of the laws of "The New Science", or of the history it provides, depends upon confirmation by the evidence. That the epistemological principle does not provide a sufficient condition of the truth of "The New Science" is confirmed further by the fact that although God, as creator of the world of nature, "knows"[1] this world, it does not follow that man, as creator of the civil world, knows the latter but only that he "can hope to know" it. This agrees with the above suggestion that our ability to construct a model in terms of which to interpret past history depends upon our possession of knowledge of "the modifications of our human mind". Our possession of such knowledge does not guarantee the truth of our model; it merely enables us to construct a certain kind of model, i.e. one appropriate to historical knowledge. Yet if we could not construct such a model there would be no account to be confirmed and historical understanding would be denied us. Our possession of knowledge of these modifications is therefore a necessary condition of ascertaining historical truth. Conjointly with the other necessary condition, confirmation by appeal to the evidence, it provides a sufficient condition of historical truth.

The effect of this theory of Vico's is to establish the limits of historical understanding. For a historical account to be true it must not

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[1] N.S. 331.

only be confirmed by the evidence, it must also be an account of a certain type, i.e. an account in which explanation is ultimately provided by recourse to the categories through which we understand our own and other people's activities. As used in historical understanding these categories are modified in such a way as to take account of the historical development of human consciousness but not in such a way that we are unable through them to understand the historical activities of man in a similar manner to that in which we understand our own. Were we to come across historical evidence which could not be used to confirm any of the possible models we could construct in accordance with the above principle, we should have to conclude that here we had reached the limits of history.

PART III

CHAPTER XVIII

Pattern in History

Vico's aim in "The New Science" is to discover the laws which govern the historical development of human activity. By a law Vico means that which is "eternal and universal", i.e. that which is necessary and universal. Vico does not try to show that there is a sense of necessity as rigorous as that of conceptual necessity attaching to these laws. He is content if he can show that, given certain factual hypotheses about man's nature and the circumstances in which the latter can spontaneously express itself, the course of human affairs must take a certain direction. Because it is the case that one cannot perform experiments upon past events, Vico tries to demonstrate this necessity by argument and by deduction. His aim here is to show that, given a certain hypothetical account of man's nature, certain conditions are necessary to human progress and that only by taking the course of social activity suggested by Vico could man have secured these conditions.

In Vico's sense neither necessity nor universality is absolute. If a certain truth is logically or conceptually necessary it is true in all possible worlds; it is therefore also a universal truth. In the sense in which Vico argues that human affairs necessarily take a certain course, this is not so. If the course is only necessary given that man has the alleged nature from which the course springs, it follows that wherever man has not this nature his history need not follow this course. The pattern of development is not true in all possible worlds; it is only true in all worlds in which man has the hypothesised nature and in which his development is affected by nothing

other than the latter.

The deduction of a pattern of history from a number of hypotheses about man's nature, although it suffices to show that the pattern is true given that the hypotheses are true, does not suffice to show that the pattern actually has application in any one case. For this to be shown some sort of empirical confirmation is required. Vico holds that this is provided when, using his pattern as a model, we are able to arrive at an account of human history, i.e. actual historical accounts, free from contradiction and inconsistency. His view of the nature of the criteria involved in this is implied in his account of the relation of human nature to social structure. He does not, however, tell us how we know when these criteria are satisfied. It is assumed that such an ability is something which we bring with us to the problem.

It has been shown that Vico's practice does not support the suggestion that the pattern of social development is abstracted from actual histories, even though the vague wording of the first set of general elements left it open that this may have been Vico's view.[1] Nevertheless, from certain vacillations to be discussed shortly it will appear that Vico had not a complete theoretical grasp of his own method and found it particularly difficult to decide what status to accord it.

The suggestion that the pattern of historical development be abstracted from actual histories could not account for the kind of pattern and kind of necessity Vico in practice adduces. Failing experimental conditions, not here available, this can only be done if we can argue that, given that man is at a certain stage of development, another stage represents either the only possible way or one of the only possible ways in which this development could

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[1] See Chapters V (iii) and X above.

continue. To argue thus we must be in possession of enough generalisations about the relation of kinds of human nature to kinds of human activity as to be able to deduce our account and rule out the alternatives.

Such a claim could not be put forward on behalf of a pattern abstracted from a number of given historical accounts. The discovery of a number of common factors and correlations in these accounts would not be enough to establish the relationship between these factors to be necessary. For the method of abstraction would not, of itself, be sufficient to distinguish between coincidental correlations between different histories and correlations arising from the conformability of the historical and social development of different nations to the same laws. Therefore, nothing more could justifiably be written into the nature of the connections in a pattern abstracted from actual histories than could be found in the actual histories themselves. It follows that the connections in an abstracted pattern of human social development could only be necessary if the connections in the histories from which the pattern was abstracted were themselves necessary.

If the suggestion that Vico wants to derive the pattern of human development from actual histories were correct, we should have to conclude that such a procedure could not support the claims made by Vico about the necessary and universal status of the connections involved in the pattern. But our consideration of Vico's actual practice has shown that it is not what he does. We have now seen the relationship between history and the laws of history implied in his practice. Formally this relationship is correctly conceived.

The pattern is therefore derived from a number of beliefs about necessary relations between kinds of human nature and kinds of human activity

under certain specifiable circumstances, i.e. from beliefs about a "natural" relationship, which the philosopher, historian or scientist, himself brings to the problem. There is, however, as yet no guarantee that these beliefs are the correct ones from which to derive the pattern. Vico does not say that it is by virtue of them that men know the pattern but only that it is by virtue of them that men "can hope to know it".[1] Different men might come to the problem of the historical laws of human activity armed with different beliefs from which to derive their models. It is possible to envisage correctly derived patterns which are mutually incompatible. Correctness of derivation is therefore no guarantee of truth but merely a necessary condition.

It follows from this that we must distinguish between patterns of human development and the pattern of human development and provide a criterion to support this distinction. Vico provides this by the alleged ability of his pattern to afford a consistent interpretation of all the evidence.[2] We must not make the mistake of thinking that such confirmation as this affords gives the pattern its universality. The latter is, as suggested above, a corollary of the necessity of the connections in the pattern and must be taken to have the same restrictions as is involved in the type of necessity Vico claims. Confirmation has the function only of distinguishing the actual pattern of human social development from other possible patterns.

It will be seen that on this view Vico is free from the difficulty which arises when the attempt is made to abstract the pattern of human development from actual histories. As I pointed out in my earlier discussion of this,[3] should a conflict arise between a first-order history and the second-order pattern, it is surely the pattern which must be abandoned and not the history.

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[1] N.S. 331. [2] N.S. 358. [3] See Chapter X above.

Moreover, in view of the ever-present possibility of such a conflict we can never ascribe a necessary status to the connections embodied in the pattern. In Vico's case, however, since the hypotheses from which the pattern is derived are those which underlie the first-order history there can be no possibility of conflict between a first-order history and the pattern. For a first-order history is nothing but a confirmed instance of the pattern.

At this point it is convenient to dispose of one misconception which might be aroused by the way in which I have tried to set out Vico's theory. Putting the latter in terms of a set of initial hypotheses, a model they support and justification of both of these by an appeal to the over-all adequacy of the interpretation of human history they afford, might suggest that Vico holds that we arrive at the problem armed first with a complete and specifiable set of hypotheses, together with a model deduced from them, and then go on to confirm these. Such a suggestion is not necessitated by any part of his theory and may be rejected. There is no reason why Vico's hypotheses and model cannot be applied in piecemeal fashion, some parts of both retained when they give a <u>prima facie</u>, plausible interpretation of part of the evidence, others abandoned when they fail to do so. It is only in the final result that one demands over-all consistency of hypotheses, model and interpreted evidence and only here that completeness is a requirement. But this is something which can legitimately be reached by a process of trial and error in which neither hypotheses nor model are taken to be either irrefutable or complete. The notion that the whole model can be worked out in advance might also be suggested by the way in which Vico tries to set it down, to a certain degree independently of the interpretations of history it supports, in the "Elements". But here there is no reason why one should presume that, because Vico was

finally able to arrive at a reasonably comprehensive conception of the model which supports, and is supported by, his account of actual histories, he necessarily started from such a complete conception.

Although Vico may be free from the difficulties engendered by the occurrence, or even the possibility, of conflict between first-order history and second-order pattern of history, since in his case there is no room for the distinction between first and second order activities, he has to face other difficulties peculiar to the nature of his theory. One of these arises in the case where we find that a set of generalisations is not adequate to provide a pattern for the interpretation of a number of actual histories. Perhaps, as Vico claims, his model will provide for a consistent interpretation of all the evidence relating to Greek and Roman history. But what happens should it be found wanting in the case of, say, the histories of Japan and China? What effect has this possibility, if we are prepared to admit it, upon his theory? Alternatively, if we are not prepared to admit it, what effect would such a refusal have upon his theory?

We may dispose of the latter difficulty first. On my account of his theories Vico could not refuse to admit the possibility that any alleged "ideal eternal history" might fail to provide the model for a certain history. For were he to do so there would be no legitimate sense in which he could claim that in the cases where the model did provide for a consistent interpretation of the evidence he had grounds for holding the model to be confirmed. It is true that at times he does write as though he is not prepared to allow for accounts which seem to conflict with his model.[1] But such

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[1] Cf. N.S. 334, in which Vico dismisses as "travellers' tales, to promote the sales of their books" the suggestion by some writers that there have been atheistic societies - a claim which, if admitted, would refute the first of Vico's "three first principles".

dogmatism is an indication of his conviction of the truth of his own version of the "ideal eternal history" rather than a position which is forced upon him by his conception of the nature of such a pattern. Consequently there are also places in which he admits that his pattern has not been exemplified universally in actual histories.[1]

It is therefore clear that in the case of any given "ideal eternal history" Vico would admit that it might not provide a pattern for the development of all histories. But it is necessary to distinguish between two senses in which such an admission might be made.

Vico might maintain that the reason why a certain account of the "ideal eternal history" was not exemplified in all actual histories was to be found in the influence in some cases of extraneous or external factors. Such factors might be large-scale natural disasters or foreign influence through conquest or war. Vico could admit this type of reason why a certain history did not follow the suggested pattern and yet still maintain that the pattern was necessary and universal in his sense, for the pattern only traces the course of development of a nation where the course is internally conditioned. Such an admission would, for example, be constituted by Vico's claim that "in the new world the American Indians would now be following this course of human things if they had not been discovered by the Europeans".[2] Vico can allow this sort of divergence from an alleged pattern on the ground that it would not be an exception to his main claim, that where a nation's history is governed only by internal factors, i.e. by the nature of the people concerned, it must take the suggested course of development.

But can Vico also admit the possibility of such exceptions where no

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[1] N.S. 1092. [2] N.S. 1095.

external factors are relevant? In other words can he admit the possibility that the internal course of different nations might differ? And what follows from his answer here?

Again, one must hold that, on the view advocated above, Vico would have to admit such a possibility. For if there is to be any legitimate sense in which the pattern is to be "confirmed" by philological tests, it must also be possible to refute it by philological tests.

This being so, we must ask: what is to be done in those cases, if there are any, in which it is not confirmed? A number of moves seem possible. The first and obvious one is to abandon this particular version of the "ideal eternal history" and try some other. We shall see shortly why Vico never seriously entertained this possibility.

But what of the case, perhaps Vico's own, in which a certain pattern seems to do justice to the history of some nations, say Greece, Rome and the various European countries mentioned in Book V on the Ricorso, but which fails to embody principles which can do justice to the development of others, say the Communist countries of the twentieth century? Are we to say that the pattern which affords acceptable histories of Greece and Rome is not acceptable because it does not afford acceptable histories of Russia and China? Or are we to say that there is one pattern for some nations and another for others, rather in the way we might apply different patterns of explanation in our attempt to understand the activities of different individuals? If we take the former course it would seem that we are putting an extraordinarily high definition upon our conception of knowledge and must admit that, insofar as we might never reach a pattern adequate to all histories, such knowledge might never be reached. But if we take the latter course it might seem that

we could never show any pattern to contain necessary and universal laws and therefore still fall short of knowledge.

It is not, in fact, obvious that the dire consequence alleged does follow in the case of the second of these alternatives. But Vico thought it did and found it difficult to know what to say in face of the two possibilities. It is this uncertainty which explains how he allowed that some histories had not conformed to his pattern and yet obstinately felt he must adhere to the apparently incompatible claim that the "ideal eternal history" describes "what had, has and will have to be".[1]

Yet it would seem that, even on this mistaken assumption, Vico ought not to have found any difficulty here. Would the obvious move not have been to argue that in "The New Science" were set out the conditions necessary for knowledge, together with an attempt to show that the "ideal eternal history" satisfied these, while at the same time, admitting that if Vico's "ideal eternal history" fell short of universal instantiation, and if no other account of the pattern could achieve it, knowledge was unobtainable in this sphere? That Vico did not argue thus is evidence of an instructive mistake he was making.

The difficulty we face is that of understanding why Vico found himself unable to abandon either of two mutually incompatible positions, i.e. the claim that the "ideal eternal history" be necessary and universal and the admission that it might fail to be universally exemplified. Let us ask first: why did he not abandon the latter demand, that it should be shown to be universally exemplified? Why, in other words, was he not content to claim that the pattern was necessary, in the limited sense we have discussed, but

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[1] N.S. 349.

not universally instantiated?

The answer to this lies in the fact that Vico was not completely decided in his own mind about the function of empirical confirmation in his scheme. From his account of the "proofs"[1] it is clear that he took empirical confirmation to be indispensable. But he did not always see for what it was indispensable. Sometimes he thought it was this which generated the universality of the pattern.[2] But according to my account of his most characteristic method of argument, the universality of the pattern, which is a limited and conditional universality, follows from its necessity, also limited and conditional. Moreover, both necessity and universality are demonstrated by argument.[3] The function of empirical confirmation here is not to confer necessity or universality upon any pattern but to distinguish the actual pattern from other possible patterns.[4] The failure of any particular pattern to be confirmed in the case of some actual histories need therefore have no unhappy repercussions on its claim to be necessary and universal and to be the key to the understanding of any histories by which it might be confirmed.

Vico, however, has failed to see this point and we must now look for the reason for this failure. Clearly enough it lies in Vico's assumption that, although there can be a number of possible "ideal eternal histories", there can only be one actual such history. Now there is obviously something wrong with this assumption as it stands. But we can best see what this is by going on to ask the question: why did Vico think there could only be one actual "ideal eternal history"? The answer to this lies in two further

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[1] See Chapter XVI above. [2] See N.S. 145.

[3] See Chapter XII above. [4] See Chapter XVI above.

assumptions he was making: that there will only be one pattern which is adequate to, or sufficient for, the understanding of any actual history and that it must be the same pattern for every actual history. It is clear that Vico took the capacity of the pattern to give us understanding to be a product of its necessity and universality.[1] We can see, therefore, that if he thought that the failure to confirm it universally constituted a refutation of its claim to be universal he would also think we had destroyed its necessity and thus rendered it useless as an instrument of understanding and of knowledge. Even worse, if he thought that the only pattern adequate to understanding and knowledge was that which was universally instantiated it would follow that the failure to achieve confirmation in any one case would entail the admission that knowledge and understanding were not possible in respect of human activities.

This position, however, is inconsistent with the admission that there might be a number of possible "ideal eternal histories". For in the former position there is embodied the assumption that the necessity and universality of the pattern is provided by empirical confirmation. It follows that even the claim of the pattern to be an instrument of the understanding would be dependent upon universal confirmation. But if this were so, in what sense could the other "ideal eternal histories" be said to be possible? At first sight they might seem to be possible in the sense that they present a number of different but intelligible, ways of construing the course of human history. But if their intelligibility is dependent upon their necessity and universality and the latter in turn upon confirmation it follows that all those

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[1] Cf. Vico's claim that "whoever meditates this Science tells himself this ideal eternal history only so far as he makes it by the proof 'it had, has and will have to be'". N.S. 349.

patterns which fail to be confirmed are not really intelligible. And if they are not really intelligible in what sense are they possible?

It is, nevertheless, essential that there be an appropriate sense in which these patterns be possible if the appeal to historical evidence is to have the legitimate function of confirming one rather than another pattern. It is senseless to talk of one pattern's being confirmed empirically if the alternatives are per se unintelligible. If there is therefore to be any sense in the admission of possible patterns these patterns must be allowed to be intelligible independently of the question of their confirmation.

What this shows is that if empirical confirmation is to have its legitimate function in Vico's scheme then the criteria as to what makes a pattern possible and what makes it actual must be distinct. If historical evidence is relevant to the latter then it is not to the former. Therefore, even where a pattern might be shown to be actual we should still have to have independent grounds for showing it to be possible and these grounds would have to be of such a nature that they were compatible with the admission of the possibility of other patterns.

It follows that Vico was wrong whenever he thought there was only one possible pattern for understanding history and that this claim could be supported by empirical confirmation of the pattern in question. Were there only one possible pattern confirmation would indeed be superfluous.

Had Vico seen this clearly he would have known what to say in the case of those recalcitrant histories which might fail to conform to his pattern. He would have felt no need to cling obstinately to the claim that his pattern told us "what had, has and will have to be". Instead he would have been free to admit in the first place that where histories failed to conform to his pattern this in no way threw doubt on its claim to give knowledge in respect of those which did conform to it. He could also admit

that other patterns could, indeed, be adequate to the recalcitrant histories and that these other patterns, where confirmed, could give us knowledge of the laws appropriate to these other histories.

It would seem that we should just conclude that Vico was inconsistent in his view of the relationship of the notions of intelligibility and confirmation in his scheme; that he used these notions in a legitimate sense in his actual practice but that in some of his theoretical pronouncements he tended towards a different view from which sprang his difficulties over the status to be accorded his results. But if we left the matter there we should fail to investigate one of the most interesting facets of Vico's theory. For we have seen that the main source of Vico's vacillations over the function of empirical confirmation was his assumption that there could only be one pattern sufficient for the understanding of any actual history and that it must be the same pattern for every actual history. We must now ask: why did Vico believe these two propositions?

We might commence with the latter which is, in a sense, the less interesting since the explanation involves that Vico had made a simple mistake. Vico insists that what men have made men can hope to know.[1] This has been shown to be in part explained by the insistence that the sufficient and necessary conditions of human history, in its general outlines, be found in human nature. Because we are human beings and can grasp the relationship between our own human nature and its necessary social context we are in a position to rediscover the past history of human nature in its social context. Thus it is that the historian and the sociologist can provide a model with

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[1] N.S. 331.

which to try to interpret the past. The insistence that men have made their own history, i.e. that in man's nature lie the sufficient and necessary conditions of the structure and development of society, means that, in theory at least, the whole of history in its general outlines is knowable, even though, for the purely contingent reason that the evidence might be lacking, it may never all be known.

If we admit that the broad outline of human history be susceptible, at least theoretically, of a complete explanation without going beyond human nature and if we were able to confirm one such pattern of explanation, one "ideal eternal history", in all actual histories, would it not follow that we had not only shown the pattern to be adequate but that we had confirmed that in it lay the laws of all human progress? This, at any rate, is Vico's view.

But the conclusion does not follow; and that for a reason Vico was aware of but the relevance of which he had here overlooked. For all that can be claimed for the pattern is that it shows that if certain conditions obtain certain results necessarily follow. But it does not show that the conditions themselves must obtain. Vico, of course, thinks that the fact that the conditions and their necessary consequences, obtain is established empirically. And so it is. But this is not enough. For such confirmation will never show that they must obtain and, therefore, that they must in the case of unknown histories, be they past or future. At best, if we accepted Vico's other claims, we could say that we know that if a certain type of nature should appear history would take a certain course. But we could not show that such a nature must appear and so we could not show that history must, in all

circumstances, take that course.

That Vico was to some extent aware of what is involved here is revealed in his admission that there is a point in our search for ultimate explanations "beyond which it is vain curiosity to demand others earlier".[1] This point is reached when we arrive at the nature of man from which the course of history springs. In Vico's own account this nature would be that of poetic man. But if it is "vain curiosity" to demand an explanation of this nature this must be because we cannot produce an account of its sufficient and necessary conditions and so cannot show either that it be necessary that such a nature should appear in the first place or that it should reappear in the case of the ricorso.

Moreover, we can see that this basic inexplicability of the first human nature follows from the very nature of Vico's epistemology. For, according to his basic principle, man can hope to know what they have themselves made,[2] i.e. their own creations. But their own crudest nature is not their own creation, it is God's. It follows that he can understand it and man cannot. It follows again that we cannot give an account of its necessary and sufficient conditions in the way we can for those things which are explained by human nature itself. From this it is clear that we cannot show the occurrence of such a nature to be necessary and so we cannot show that all histories must take the course postulated by the ideal pattern.

It seems, therefore, that Vico's claim that the course of all history must conform to his pattern is inconsistent with the basic epistemological principle on which the possibility of establishing such a pattern itself

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[1] N.S. 346. [2] N.S. 331.

depends. It follows from the epistemological principle that if a man of a certain type appears on earth a pattern can be constructed to show the course his history must take. But it does not follow that a man of that type must appear. Vico has again lost sight of the hypothetical nature of the necessity and universality of his pattern and has advanced to a more extravagant and unjustifiable claim.

We may now consider the more interesting question: why did Vico believe there was one, and only one, pattern adequate for understanding history? To answer this we must begin by looking at Vico's conception of an explanatory pattern.

Vico had noted, quite rightly, that when we explain an event we often do so by reference to a pattern or system of activities in which we can locate the event in question and trace its relationship with other constituents of the system. Furthermore, what gives a set of events its right to be thought of as part of a pattern is the fact that one can discover, or at least adduce, some relevant rules which state various relationships and connections between kinds of events. Thus we contend that event A explains event B when we have grasped a general rule, suitably specified, about the nature of the relationships between events of kind A and those of kind B.

Historians do something of this sort all the time. We are told, perhaps, that dissatisfaction over a certain economic or social state of affairs was the cause of a certain economic or social change. The historian shows that this explanation is the correct one by showing how, in a number of specific cases, the dissatisfaction felt by certain persons was followed by their acting in certain ways. But beyond this he does not go. He assumes that we take such an account to be an explanation. And, of course, we do.

But not because of the particular sequence of actual events the historian has traced for us. We accept that it is an explanation because we have learnt, in other contexts, to understand and use the general rules presupposed by this account. And were it not the case that the historian had done this it would never occur to him to offer the particular account he does as an explanation.

But in his conception of a pattern Vico goes one stage beyond this. He assumes that patterns of explanation involving rules of a specific level of generality, themselves are explanatory only in so far as they can be linked up into a pattern in which they presuppose yet more general rules. And this process can be carried on indefinitely until we reach an over-all pattern in which all the rules are linked together in such a way that they can all be traced back to dependence upon one, or a few, very basic and very general rules which themselves form an intelligible pattern of explanation.

Given such a conception it is easy to see why one might, as did Vico, come to think that there could only be one such over-all pattern and hence only one truly intelligible pattern for understanding history. To put it another way, it might seem that for any human event there could be one, and only one, fully sufficient explanation and that it would be a condition of the acceptability of this explanation that it be consistent with a sufficient explanation for all other events. These assumptions made by Vico are, however, questionable.

Even if we accept that when we understand an explanation of certain events by seeing their connection with others we do so by virtue of seeing this as an instance of a relationship between types of events, it is not obvious that we ought to accept the further view that we understand these

relationships between types of events only by reference to relationships between yet more general types of events. For were we to accept this additional claim there would still remain the problem of the most general rules which cannot be explained in this way, since there would be no yet more general rules to help us. In this case our ability to understand the most general rules must depend on some other characteristic - perhaps an alleged self-evidence of which we could have some sort of rational intuition. But if such an account were offered we could ask why it was thought impermissible to apply the same sort of account to the less general rules. At least it would have to be admitted that one could in principle apply such an account to the less general rules even if it were also contended that this is not, in fact, what we ever do. But this admission alone would be enough to show that it is not the case that there can only be one over-all pattern sufficient for the understanding of human history. It would thus show that it is not necessary that all explanations be of such a nature that they be inter-related in a pattern in Vico's sense.

A defence against this would have to argue that the most general rules were somehow more luminous, i.e. that we could understand them, perhaps because of their simplicity, in a way we could not their less general and more specific consequents. But this would be a very odd line for Vico to take since he explicitly says that it takes a tremendous effort of the understanding to grasp for example the ways of thinking of poetic man.[1] In any case it would still have to be shown why these most general rules were claimed to be *per se* intelligible as against the less general which derived their intelligibility from them. Since this would be a question of principle, involving the very question what it is for a rule to be intelligible, simplicity would not, after all, suffice as an answer. For there is no obvious

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[1] N.S. 338.

contradiction in the notion of simple rules about the way human nature manifests itself being no more intelligible than other less simple rules.

It seems clear that in thinking that we can only use patterns of explanation if we can see these patterns as part of an inter-related system Vico is wrong. The noting of this mistake goes a long way towards explaining why he was driven to make his most extravagant claim on behalf of the "ideal eternal history" - that it tells us what "had, has and will have to be" - and why he could not rest content with the more moderate claims which, as we have seen, it could more plausibly have supported. For if Vico thought that ultimately there was only one pattern by virtue of which we could understand the history of human activity and that it must be the same pattern for the whole of human activity it becomes easy to see why he was unwilling to admit that the pattern might fail to be "confirmed" by the evidence relevant to some histories. If this occurred we should not only have to admit that we could have no knowledge in the case of the recalcitrant histories - they would be "metaphysical" in the contemporary pejorative sense of that term - but we should also have to conclude that the pattern was inadequate to those histories which did conform to it.

This mistake of Vico's does not, however, cast doubt upon the value of the notion of an "ideal eternal history". The latter can remain unaffected if we draw a simple distinction between Vico's claim and another which is much more plausible. Vico could admit that we can understand an event simply by virtue of our grasp of an appropriate pattern of explanation but maintain now that we understand better or more deeply when we can see relationships between patterns of explanation and can bring these inter-related patterns to bear upon a set of actual events. On such a view it is not necessary that

in order to understand an event by locating it in a pattern of explanation we must be able to locate the pattern as part of a still wider pattern but if we can do the latter we understand the event in question in a different way and at a deeper level.

This distinction would suffice to retain all that is valuable in Vico's conception of an "ideal eternal history" and put it in a truer light. It utilises the notion that there are levels or depths of understanding while admitting that we can also use patterns of explanation without seeing their bearing upon one another. Vico's mistake seems to have been to have assumed that because we explain by reference to patterns of explanation, and because we can in principle see no reason why all human activities should not ultimately be explicable by reference to the same over-all pattern, we can only understand them if they are explained in this way. He has overlooked the fact that we often do explain events by reference to a particular pattern of relationships between kinds of events without being able to see how this pattern is related to others. Moreover, we decide what level of explanation is appropriate in a particular context not on the grounds of a relationship it may or may not have with a more ultimate principle but simply because understanding a pattern of explanation carries with it a grasp of the sort of event to, and context in, which to apply it. Thus if one historian wishes to explain the outbreak of the First World War by reference to national self-pride, another as a necessary consequence of certain political alignments formed many years previously and another by reference to the fears and ambitions of a few influential individuals, we can understand each of these explanations in its own context and each can claim to be true. Often an historian when talking about the causes of the war will offer a large number of such causes. Yet there is no need to assume that if these accounts are

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to be accepted as intelligible or true they must all be part of one overall account, the Truth, so called because ultimately all its different elements can be shown to constitute a consistent and comprehensive system in which they are all mutually derivable from the same few intelligible principles of human nature.

But having said this we need not go to an extreme and say that because we can understand explanations of a partial nature it is therefore neither desirable nor possible that we should have a sufficient explanation of the sort Vico is offering. An historian can certainly offer an explanation of, say, the First World War, if he wishes, in terms of the leading characters involved and there is no reason why we should deny that we can understand his account. This alone would be enough to show that Vico was wrong in thinking that there was one, and only one, pattern of explanation adequate for any understanding of history. But there is no reason why, just because we can understand this explanation, we should accept it as the best explanation or deny that we can understand others more deeply.

To see what we should say here and to come to some assessment of Vico's position it is necessary to make a few points about explanation and description. We have seen that it is one of the principal contentions of "The New Science" that history can never be purely descriptive. Just because human activity is essentially end-directed its description would be incomplete without reference to its ends and an account which includes these would at once explain the activity in question.

In "The New Science" Vico is very much concerned with this aspect of things. In his own historical accounts his explanations are often accomplished through his descriptions. It is also clear that he understood the

theoretical consideration involved here.[1] Nevertheless it must be faced that his preoccupation with the theoretical aspect of explanation led him to neglect the theoretical aspect of description. This must be to some extent rectified.

We note first that explanations operate in a context. Whether a remark is an explanation or not depends largely on its context for no remark is per se explanatory. Thus in one context the remark "John was angry" would be an explanation: it would tell us why John acted as he did. In another context it might be a description, simply telling us about John's mental state at a certain time.

In history the context is something which has to be described. The description can be offered in various ways and at different levels of detail or generality and the level and kind of explanation which will be relevant here is largely determined by the level and kind of description in which its context is given. Thus in one case it would be appropriate to explain the outbreak of the First World War by reference to the personalities of the leading statesmen of the day. Such an explanation would presuppose that, from the way the context had been described and in view of the state of knowledge and expectation built up in the reader, the question to be answered was why those statesmen took the decisions they did. In another case, however, such an explanation would be inappropriate because, again from the description of the context, it would be clear that what needed to be explained was how and why the system of political alignments arose in which such decisions could have the effect they did.

It is true that historians are not always clear about the relation

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[1] Cf. Elements XIV and XV, discussed in Chapter VI above.

between kinds of explanation and kinds of description. Thus much dispute, even where all the relevant information and evidence is available, about the cause of the First World War is not genuine dispute at all for there is no way in which it can be settled. This is because the historians concerned have described the situation in such a way that the explanations offered are really explanations of different things.

This can be seen if we consider two such explanations. In one we might explain the outbreak of the war as the inevitable outcome of certain economic tendencies in the world. In the other we might explain it by reference to the activities of the Kaiser and his naval command. There is a presumption here that the two explanations cannot both be true if we assume that they are both offered as accounts of the cause of the war. But what is the 'war' here referred to? The explanations offered by the historians both refer to the war as described by them and there may be few relevant factors in which these coincide. The dispute between them is therefore spurious for they are explaining different things.

The important point here is that any set of facts allows of a very wide set of alternative descriptions. In history the position is made more complicated because what passes there as a fact is often a very complex state of affairs indeed. To these different descriptions different explanations are relevant and often, given their respective descriptive contexts, there is no way of choosing between these different explanations. Each is in order as it stands.

But it does not follow that we cannot exercise a rational choice here. The explanations offered are only in order, and our assent commanded, given the descriptive context. We can still question whether we want a description

of the sort offered and we can do so on the ground that the kind of explanation which it makes appropriate is insufficient or unacceptable. In other words, although it is true that explanations often operate in descriptive contexts we can ask whether we are satisfied with the whole type of account being given.

It becomes therefore the question how we justify a preference for one kind of account rather than another. We must note first that a capacity to deal with the historical evidence would not be a sufficient reason here, for what is to count as evidence, how it should be selected, arranged and used, and the sort of description one will put forward on the basis of it, are all dependent upon the sort of account one is trying to give. Clearly something about the adequacy of the account is determined by its relation to the evidence. We should not be happy with an account which was such that much of what had hitherto passed as good evidence for throwing light on history would now have to be rejected as useless. On the other hand neither can we simply reject a kind of account like Vico's which considerably expands our conception of what is to count as historical evidence and how it is to be used to do this.[1] Otherwise there would be no possibility of progress in our conception of what history should be and the kinds of explanation appropriate to it.

We must admit therefore that the evidence is not a given, incorrigible datum by reference to which alone we can justify preferences for particular kinds of accounts. The decision between different kinds of account must rest on other grounds than this.

It seems to me that we cannot decide here other than by giving our preference to that which most nearly approaches our ideal of the strongest account possible. Since in history we deal with factual matters this ideal is best represented by the sort of account at which the natural sciences aim

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[1] Cf. Chapter VIII above.

i.e. by an account which establishes the laws by reference to which we can validate claims to knowledge in particular cases. The laws in question state the sufficient and necessary conditions of the occurrence of events of the kind in question.

This might seem to take us into the current controversy about the nature of historical explanations: whether they really have the same character as the explanations offered in the applied sciences or whether they are acceptable as long as they offer accounts of necessary conditions. But it is not necessary to enter this dispute since it is admitted by those who favour the weaker case here that if explanations of the stronger kind were available they would be preferable. We can therefore accept that where Vico can substantiate his claim to explain through an account of the sufficient and necessary conditions those matters of which rivals offer an account only of necessary conditions his type of account is to be preferred.[1] Consequently the conception of the use of evidence which is involved in his view is also to be accepted.

Two points must be made in connection with this claim. I have tried to show that Vico's claim that we can have knowledge in the case of human affairs but not in that of the natural world should not be taken as a distinction between knowledge and something weaker but between two different kinds of understanding.[2] The laws involved in our understanding of human affairs will not be, as with those of the natural sciences, statements of invariable correlations between natural phenomena but statements of the way the human mind develops and manifests itself under certain conditions. It

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[1] For a discussion of how far his account goes in this direction see Chapter X above.

[2] See Chapter XVII above.

is by reference to these, as we have seen in Vico's own theory,[3] that we shall be able to establish claims to knowledge in particular cases.

We must note further, however, that as used by Vico these are not sufficient to validate our claims to knowledge. We must recall the hypothetical element in Vico's method. He is not saying that from certain laws we can deduce certain occurrences but that from certain hypotheses we can deduce them. There is no question, however, of these hypotheses being known to be true antecedently of their bearing upon the evidence. It is important to emphasise this or we shall fail to do justice to Vico's concern over the problem of historical conditioning. We have seen that he is particularly worried by the question of what the historian can legitimately assume is known about the agents of history and how he is to avoid imputing to them kinds of motivation and ways of thinking and acting which are historically unacceptable. We need some sort of generalisations about the causes of human activity to underlie our various hypotheses about the possible causes of history and to give us the key to the interpretation of the evidence; but we cannot know these to be true independently of the evidence. Conversely, we can establish the general hypotheses as true by factual confirmation but we cannot know that the confirming facts are true unless the hypotheses which underlie their interpretation are correct. The consequence is that in history knowledge of fact and of law is mutually dependent. We cannot have it in one case without having it in the other.

Once this is seen one final difficulty in the interpretation of Vico is removed. We know that in "The New Science" there is to be a rapprochement of philosophy and philology: each will confirm the other. But Vico also

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[3] Cf. N.S. 177, 180, 183 and 189 for a selection of such statements.

wanted to limit knowledge to that which is universal and eternal, i.e. to laws, and left us in the pre-Vichian world with mere belief about facts. He does not tell us, moreover, what the status of our consciousness of facts will be as a result of the New Science. If it remained as belief, Vico would be in the odd position of suggesting that we can establish knowledge of laws by appeal to facts which are merely believed. We can now see, however, that this is not his position. If our conception of the explanation of human activity is adequate we shall be able to come to mutually supporting knowledge of both the laws and the facts of history.

CHAPTER XIX

Conclusion

It is appropriate now to come to some conclusions drawn from the thesis as a whole as well as from the discussion in the foregoing chapter. These are confined to Vico's contribution to the philosophy and methodology of history and sociology and do not touch upon his work as a historian as such.

First, I think Vico's account of the nature of human activity as being essentially motivated and end-directed is substantially correct. It follows that he is also correct in his insistence that the way we understand human actions differs from that in which we understand the facts of natural science. One would not wish to deny that it would be possible to describe actual human events, and hence some historical facts, in the same way as the facts of natural science. This is because human activities conform to the conditions which make such description possible. But they also conform to conditions which make other kinds of description and explanation applicable as well. Thus we have what amounts to entirely different ways of talking about them based upon criteria and evidence of very different kinds. If Vico means, as I have suggested,[1] that there is a radical difference between the ways in which we understand human and non-human activities he is correct.

Second, I think that Vico's contention that the historian and the sociologist should use this different kind of understanding is also correct. If we take first the case of the historian the main argument against his using it is that it is not susceptible of the same degree of verification as a

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[1] See Chapter XVII above.

scientific description. But Vico has shown that there are no grounds for holding that there is more difficulty in describing the ends to which an activity is directed than in describing the activity itself. In neither case are we merely describing what is in front of us. In both cases we are constructing a hypothetical account of what happened and then confirming this by an appeal to the evidence.

The position is little different in the case of the sociologist. To think that the natural scientist can verify his laws in a more rigorous way than the sociologist is a mistake. And the reason for this is that, on the account which I have attributed to Vico, the method of the sociologist would be substantially the same as one of those employed in natural science - the hypothetico-deductive method. If the purposes, motives and intentions of kinds of men are verifiable, we have no grounds for believing that there is any objection in principle to laws which establish psychological propensities as the explanation of social structure and social change. I am inclined to think that Vico was wrong in thinking that psychological factors alone were sufficient, but even if one thinks that other factors are relevant here there is no difficulty in principle in the notion of scientific laws which state the conditions under which psychological propensities will be the causes of certain social phenomena.

Third, however, I think that Vico's suggestion that, because the categories used by the historian and the sociologist differ from those used by the natural scientist, we must reject the claim of the latter to give us knowledge is incorrect. This was suggested by Vico on the grounds that the natural sciences were concerned with what God had made but the New Scientist with what man had made. It seems clear that Vico had here overlooked the corollary to his theory which I draw in Chapter XVII, that the laws of both the natural and the

social scientist are man's own creations. If we accept that the hypotheses used by both are the creation of man and that the standards of confirmation are the same in the two cases, then if both are verified we cannot grant to one the status of knowledge and yet refuse it to the other. If, as is the case, there is a difference between the sorts of things correlated in the laws of the two sciences it is less misleading to indicate this by talking of two kinds of understanding than by reserving the title of knowledge for only one of them.

Fourth, it will be seen from the foregoing that in my view Vico's account of the nature of the method used by historians and sociologists is also substantially correct. It is perhaps misleading to refer to this as Vico's "account" since it is not well discussed at a theoretical level by Vico. But, as I have tried to show, it is certainly the account which is most strongly suggested by those passages, of which there are many, in which Vico argues in such a way as to reveal his method.

Fifth, it follows from the first two of the above points that Vico is in a position to put forward a criterion for the limits of history. Vico's own suggestion is that history is limited to those periods in which men "began to think humanly".[1] In effect this means that it is limited to that period in which the model provided by the "ideal eternal history", which is in turn based upon the modifications of "our own human mind", can be confirmed. Since Vico has shown that the possibility of using certain categories and certain kinds of explanation for purposes of historical interpretation and understanding depends upon our ordinary grasp of those same categories in their everyday use it follows that history is limited to those periods which offer conditions which will suffice for the application of these categories.

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[1] N.S. 338.

As it stands this is rather a vague criterion. We do not know, for example, how many of our ordinary categories of description and explanation must be applicable to any period of history before we can talk of understanding it. Does such understanding require all of our categories? This is too improbable to merit discussion. The criterion fails to distinguish, however, between two more plausible suggestions. It might be taken to mean that all the categories applicable to any period of history must come from those of which the historian has an everyday grasp; or it might be taken to mean that certain basic categories, from which we may deduce others less basic, must come from those which the historian brings to the problem. Vico's formula, that the "principles" of "the world of civil society ... are ... to be recovered from the modifications of our own human mind" is not explicit enough to decide here. In his practice, however, it has been shown that, starting from some principles which we understand quite well (those of religion and marriage, for example) and others which we perhaps understand less well (the assumption of the correctness of anthropomorphic thinking, perhaps) we can deduce modes of thought and activity very far removed from our own.[1] This suggests that Vico favours the second possibility.

But in any case the question which of these ought to be accepted cannot be decided merely by an appeal to what Vico does. What is required to decide between these possibilities would be an enquiry into the conditions on which rests the possibility of understanding conceptual schemes other than our own. Such an enquiry would have to be philosophical, indeed transcendental in Kant's sense of the term. Vico fails entirely to produce such an enquiry so there is no point in discussing it in relation to him. What he

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[1] See Chapter XVIII above.

can be said to have done, however, is provide a formula, albeit a vague one, which does indicate the assumption upon which such an enquiry would be based.

Sixth, I think that Vico is absolutely correct in his implied suggestion that whoever would offer a "science" must be prepared and able to set out the general presuppositions of his arguments. The notion of a "science" here is very vague. It is clear that for Vico and for us a science claims to give us knowledge. For Vico, however, knowledge of facts and knowledge of laws are inseparable and the question whether such knowledge is obtainable in the sphere of human activity could not be decided until somebody tried to apply Vico's scheme or one like it.

On this view Vico's requirement would be demanded of the sociologist. But here such a requirement would be superfluous for in the sociologist's case any initial assumptions he makes are revealed in the laws he confirms. For a law is, after all, nothing but the establishment of the sufficient and necessary conditions of a certain, in this case social, kind of occurrence. Since it contains a statement of the conditions under which the truth holds good, nothing is presupposed which is not stated.

But the notion of knowledge is today applied in two cases where, if his stringent requirements were not satisfied, Vico would say we would have to rest content with consciousness, or belief.[1] These are the cases where the historian claims knowledge of individual facts (such as that Columbus discovered America in 1492) and where he claims knowledge of some sequence of fact which, it is alleged, will explain some other fact. It would be profitable to see how these claims would be affected by Vico's suggestion.

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[1] See Chapter V above.

I turn to the first: is there anything to be gained by setting out the presuppositions on which depends the historian's claim to know certain facts? On the whole it does not seem so for historians rarely disagree over these facts. On certain issues such agreement is less widespread (Was there a gunpowder plot? Did Henry II "command" the death of Beckett?) But this sort of disagreement would probably not be cleared up by adducing the presuppositions of one's arguments. For historians are basically in agreement about the standards to be applied in settling such matters. Their disagreement here stems from the contingent fact that the evidence does not allow these standards to be fully applied.

The position seems a little different when we turn to the more obscure and distant periods of history. Here the presuppositions made by historians vary more widely. There is disagreement, for example, over the problem which occupied Vico - the interpretation of the Iliad and Odyssey. The disagreement here is over how to take such accounts, how much of them to take as literal and how much as symbolic. But this sort of disagreement would probably not be cleared up by the adducing of the presuppositions of one's arguments for these are often evident from the arguments themselves. On the whole, therefore, I do not think that the historian's claim to know individual facts would be much altered by setting out the standards presupposed by his argument.

I turn now to the case in which the historian claims knowledge of a connected sequence of fact. The point has already been made,[1] that while historians often agree over the facts, they disagree over the relation of the facts or, to put it differently, over their significance. They often choose to describe the same fact in different ways and to explain it by

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[1] See Chapter XVIII above.

recourse to different material, at the same time claiming that theirs is the only acceptable way of doing so and rejecting rival accounts. The result is that in this sense history cannot claim to be a science for even the experts, given the theoretical availability of the same material, cannot agree over the correct account to give of the matter in question. This position arises because historians are often working at cross-purposes.[1] They have failed to evolve a common descriptive procedure or a common conception of the standards to which an account of this sort should conform. This in itself makes it difficult to think of their work as scientific. The difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that, in their very disagreements they show that they do not recognise that this is the case, arguing as though there were ways of settling disagreements which, in the position they are in, are in principle unresolvable.

Now it is this latter difficulty which could be removed by Vico's method of setting out the basic philosophical and sociological postulates assumed by any account, i.e. by setting out one's conception of the nature of the human activities, or whatever else it is that the historian is concerned with, together with an account of the proper ways in which to describe and explain this, and the way in which to interpret the materials which will support such accounts. A number of advantages would follow from this. The historian should, if he has done his work well, be able to claim that if one accepts the type of account put forward one must accept as knowledge what is actually put forward. Should one find the type of account acceptable but not the actual account then either not enough evidence is available to support a claim of knowledge or some mistake has been made which is in principle

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[1] See Chapter XVIII above.

rectifiable. In general, therefore, direct refutations should be available for claims to knowledge. On the other hand, where disagreement exists over the acceptability of the kind of account to be offered, discussion of this could be carried on without being confused with discussion of whether or not it is an adequate account of its type. In other words philosophy and history will not be confused.

History written under these conditions could, I think, claim to be scientific. Of course it might not follow that historians would find themselves in the same agreement as the natural scientists over how their material should be described and explained. But it is only a contingent facts that natural scientists are in such agreement any way. The claim that their procedures and results are scientific does not therefore depend upon such unanimity; so the claim of historians to be scientific would not be refuted by failure to achieve it. The natural scientist's claim to knowledge rests upon his ability to give an account of the sufficient and necessary conditions for the occurrence of certain phenomena. Even given different approaches to the question of describing their material historians could make the same claim. Their account of the causes of the facts could be on just as sure a footing as their account of the facts themselves.

In my view, therefore, Vico was entirely correct in trying to set out the presuppositions of his account as they are contained in his discussions of the nature of human activity and of the nature of historical method and in his social philosophy. In doing this he showed an awareness of the problems and a sophistication in his conception of how to deal with them lacking in many subsequent historians.

Seventh, however, although I think Vico could claim that his work was

scientific in the above three senses, we must reject its claim to be scientific in a yet stronger sense. For even if the first claim is accepted, that we can have sociological laws, it does not follow from that that we can have laws for the history of any society as a whole, laws which enable us to predict its future as a whole. The reason for this is that while a law gives us knowledge of what will happen given certain conditions it does not give us knowledge that these conditions will obtain. We might think, as did Vico, that we can satisfy the latter requirement by showing that we have knowledge of laws which state the conditions under which these conditions will obtain. But ultimately Vico was driven back to provide an element in explanation which itself could not be explained - his basic kind of human nature. If this is taken to be ultimate, i.e. inexplicable by reference to other conditions, it follows that we cannot discover the laws which govern its history and so cannot claim to know in any scientific manner that any society whatsoever must develop in a particular way. To employ a distinction made by Professor Popper,[1] we may have laws establishing the dependence of some kinds of social phenomena upon others, but when it comes to a law for the whole pattern of social change, or a law for a basic kind of change on which all the others depend, here at best we can only find a trend, and a trend is not a sufficient basis for claiming knowledge in any other case.

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[1] "The Poverty of Historicism", pp. 115-116.

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